Australian Consumers' Association

March 2000

CHOICE

www.choice.com.au

Hate your bank?
Find out what others think

Viagra and other 'lifestyle' drugs

Washing machines, fridges, TVs, VCRs:
Which brands are most reliable?

What's a good breakfast cereal?

Over 120 rated

MORE TESTS:

- **Video recorders**
- **Electric cooktops**
- **Kettles**

Bugged by your bank?

Jane Mackenzie

People don't like their banks. You made that extremely clear when you answered our latest survey asking about your satisfaction with your bank, credit union or building society (see page 15).

Only two banks had half or more of their customers who were 'very satisfied'; the rest ranged from just 10% to 20%. The big four banks in particular took a caning: ANZ, Commonwealth, National and Westpac had a lower percentage of 'very satisfied' customers than most other institutions for almost every aspect of banking we asked about.

Credit unions and building societies found more favour, in particular for their high number of free transactions and lower account-keeping fees.

So why do we stay with the banks we hate? A lot of us feel tied there because of a home loan or some other relationship that means we don't pay those fees. Others just think it's too hard to tell which other bank accounts would be better for them, so they stay put. And this is despite only 10% of survey respondents who bank with the big banks saying they thought they treated them better than five years ago.

So the big four banks made a total of $29 billion in profit over the last five years with little or no perceived improvement for consumers. What other industry can boast this kind of profit with perpetually unsatisfied customers?

Fight back — find out how to avoid the fees (see page 19). If you can, change to one of the banks that satisfied its customers better in our survey, or maybe to a local credit union or building society. Vote with your feet and your money.

Perhaps it's high time to let the banks know we're mad as hell and we're not going to take it any more.

Jane Mackenzie, Editor

Your letters

We welcome the letters you send us — please always include a daytime telephone number so we can contact you quickly if we want to follow up your letter. We're sorry we can't personally answer every letter we receive, but we do use them in our research. Thanks for taking the time to keep in touch.
Write to us at CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.
Phone us on (02) 9577 3399.
Fax us on (02) 9577 3355.
email us at ausconsumer@choice.com.au
World Wide Web address: www.choice.com.au

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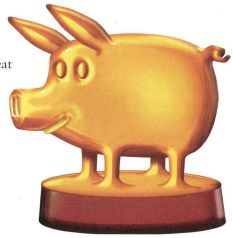

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Want to save yourself money and hassle? Find out which brands of washing machine, fridge, TV, VCR and lawnmower break down the least.

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Most cordless kettles boil water reasonably fast, but when you're using one every day you want it to be easy to use too.

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A test of 12 ceramic radiant cooktops: they look good — is their cooking good too?

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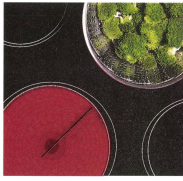
Cheap, basic mono VCRs can give you just as good a picture as more upmarket models, but you won't get hifi sound or fancy features.



Your subscription and the GST

The GST comes into effect on July 1, 2000, and will apply to any issues of CHOICE in your subscription period that go past this date. As a non-profit organisation we can't afford to absorb this cost and will be including it in the subscription price. So if you subscribe or renew your subscription any time between August 1999 and the end of June this year, some of the issues will attract the tax. After July 1, GST will apply to the whole subscription.

Page 49 shows the subscription prices for periods starting from the next issue, and they'll be updated every month up to July 2000. If you have any queries about this, please call CHOICE Consumer Services on (02) 9577 3399 (or see the bottom of page 2 — far left — for further contact details).

CHOICE*cuts*

Preventable deaths

DID YOU THINK WE WENT overboard with our safety concerns when you read about the latest cot test in September last year? Does it really matter whether a protrusion is a little too long, or a gap just a little too wide? After all, we're talking millimetres here.

Our concerns are justified. Figures from the NSW Paediatric Death Registry, released shortly after we published our test results, revealed that in the decade ending December 1997, 19 babies and young children died in their cots. "Better design, structure or placement of the cot might have prevented 16 of these deaths," says Professor Danny Cass, who heads the research team at the New Children's Hospital in Westmead, NSW.

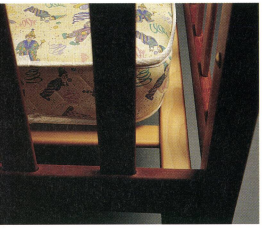
The two most common problems were asphyxiation after slipping into a gap between the mattress and the side of the cot, or having clothing caught on a protrusion. When we tested 11 cots last year, five failed the protrusions requirement of the mandatory standard, and only five of the mattresses supplied by the retailers matched the cot manufacturer's size recommendations.

Before you put a child in a cot, make sure it:

- Has no protrusions that could catch on the child's clothing.
- Has no footholds that allow climbing (including cot bumpers or soft toys left in the cot).
- Has a firm-fitting mattress (gaps between the mattress and the cot sides shouldn't be more than 25 mm).
- Is placed out of reach of windows and other furniture.

And when the child is able to climb out of the cot, it's time to move them to a bed or a mattress on the floor.

For more information on what to look for when buying a cot, see CHOICE, September 1999.



Babies can get their head or limbs caught, or suffocate, when they slip into a gap between the mattress and the side of the cot.

Cot-related deaths in NSW, 1988–97

Head caught between the mattress and cot side	5
Accidental hanging from clothing caught on cot	4
Accidental hanging from blind cord in cot	3
Accidental hanging from cot sides	2
Head trapped between slats of cot side	1
Fall from cot when cot side left down	1
Collapse of portable cot	1
Plastic nappy bag over head (in cot)	1
Cat sleeping on child's face (in cot)	1

Wanted! CHOICE Home Testers

Have you ever wanted the chance to try out products for yourself before paying good money for them? Join the 'CHOICE Home Tester' panel to help us assess products over the coming year.

As a CHOICE Home Tester you'll be sent products a couple of times during the year to try or taste at home. After you've used or tasted them you'll fill in a survey, rating their performance.

We're looking for reliable people from all over Australia. The products you'll be trying this year are varied — anything from disposable razors and toothpaste to tomato sauce. We can't pay you for your time, but you get to keep the products you try.

If you're interested in being involved, phone (02) 9577 3333 during business hours and we'll send you an application form.

Thanks for your help.

Welcome to choice.com.au

CHOICE now has a new-generation website, CHOICE Online — if you can get on the Internet, check it out at **www.choice.com.au**.

There's all the information in CHOICE itself, plus more, such as forums on various topics where you can put your point of view and see what others think. You can keep in touch with recalls — we put them on the website as soon as they're published. And there'll be up-to-the-minute comments and discussion on anything in the news that concerns consumers: rights, scams, market changes and so on.

Magazine subscribers can have free trial access to the members-only part of the website. This will be for at least 12 months, depending on when your next renewal occurs, and provided you remain a subscriber. Just email us at **ausconsumer@choice.com.au**, giving your name, address and phone number (and subscriber number if you know it — it's on the mailing label that comes with CHOICE), and we'll send you a user name and password.

And we'd love to hear what you think of the new website — please email us at the above address with your comments.

The *fresh* fruit people?

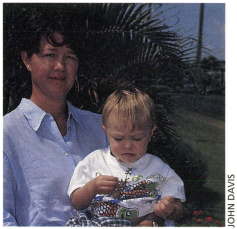
SUBSCRIBER LINLEY BAGNALL WAS shopping in Woolies when, to her horror, she spotted a store employee spraying surface spray over the fruit display. "My eyes were just popping out of my head," she says, as she watched the spray falling onto fruit. "I know everything you buy has had sprays on it, but this ... there was a lot of spraying going on, not just a couple of squirts."

She complained, but was told the store was forced to spray because of a problem with fruit flies. Left with the impression that the shop sprayed fruit on a regular basis, she was deeply concerned: "I've been feeding my two-year-old those grapes all summer." She always washes fruit before eating it, but wonders: "Does a quick rinse under the tap get the spray off, or does it soak in?"

CHOICE spoke to the manager of the Woolworths store in question (at the Tweed City Shopping Centre in NSW), who said he himself had applied the spray because some apricots, which he'd thrown out, had been badly infested with fruit flies. His aim was to spray the signs and lights, but he accepted the spray would have fallen onto the fruit.

He said it's not normal policy to spray fruit: "I realise I've done the wrong thing, but the situation is it's been done and it won't be done again." His justification for his actions? He was merely trying to protect the rest of the fruit in the store, besides which, "I would think it only natural that it was washed before usage." However, he agreed that he didn't know whether washing the fruit would help.

The manufacturer of the spray used says any fruit that's been sprayed should be thrown out. A spokesperson said, "Under no circumstances could I advise anybody to eat food that's been in contact with a spray." He couldn't say whether or not washing the fruit would remove it.



JOHN DAVIS

Not impressed: "I've been feeding my two-year-old those grapes all summer!"

All surface spray cans produced by the company are marked: "Do not spray directly on humans, pets, exposed food, food utensils or food preparation surfaces."

Woolworths head office confirmed that the company's policy is that fresh food shouldn't be sprayed. It says it will remind store managers of their obligations and will be following up on that reminder — a necessary monitoring step if any safety policy is to be worth the paper it's written on.

CHOICE is one of many consumer magazines from organisations worldwide that make up Consumers International. Get the lowdown on what's happening with your fellow consumers around the world in World Consumer Snapshot.

Pills for pongs

These days it seems there's a tablet for just about anything. The latest magic pill purports to put an end to that most embarrassing of personal hygiene problems: BO.

Rather than a generous application of the old underarm deodorant, why not try Deorella, an oral deodorant containing micro algae called chlorella, which supposedly neutralise the smell of sweat?

After recruiting test subjects to take the tablets for several days, Germany's *Test* magazine put three professional sniffers to work. Their 'good noses' sniffed armpits at certain times of the day before, during and after the tablets were taken to determine whether and by how much the smell of sweat had reduced.

The results? Only a very brief reduction in pong was noted — 0.5 on a five-point stench scale, compared to 2 with standard deodorants. The subjects themselves turned their noses up at the pills, and at just under a dollar a day *Test* suggests that Deorella is an expensive olfactory fizzer.

A lost cause?

Ever left something on the train? According to *Which?* magazine, the UK traveller has a pretty slim chance of being reunited with lost goods, even in the event of items reaching the lost property office.

Which? handed in a coat with a wallet containing £10 and the owner's contact details to lost property offices at eight major railway stations. Only four of the eight offices bothered to check the item and contact the owner — and one of the returned wallets was missing the £10.

Light up, lover!

It's difficult to put anything past those dastardly tobacco companies as they fight to corrupt another generation of young lungs, battling against health warnings and advertising restrictions. It's therefore comforting to know that, on dialling the toll-free number of the Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation, US *Consumer Reports* magazine found a caring voice:

"We, the Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corporation, are in love ... with you," said the recorded message that greeted callers. "We're a giant corporation, and you make us feel like a little kitten. Thank you, lover. By the way, the other tobacco companies hate you and think you're ugly. They told us so. Now, press 1 to be put on our mailing list."

Want to work for CHOICE?

CHOICE and CHOICE Online are looking for someone to join their quality assurance team. We need someone who is comfortable dealing with and interpreting technical and research information; you'll probably have a degree in a science or technology field and/or wide-ranging employment experience where such skills have been developed.

It's vital that you have excellent communication and negotiation skills, both oral and written, and that you demonstrate maturity, judgment and meticulous attention to detail, without being dogmatic. An understanding of quality assurance principles, an interest in consumer issues and the ability to be flexible about work times are also important.

The position is equivalent to about three days a week (but not necessarily three days every week), based in Sydney, and will mainly consist of end-point quality checking ('verification') of reports and articles on a wide range of consumer topics. This is a contract position, initially for 12 months, with salary dependent on qualifications and experience — around $22,000.

For a full job description contact Barbara Manchester on (02) 9577 3313 or at bmanchester@choice.com.au, or send your résumé to her at 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, marked 'Quality assurance position'. Please have your applications in by March 20, 2000.

Can you help?

Back pain

Many people suffer from back pain for a variety of reasons — from strained muscles and ligaments to serious disorders like cancer and bone infection. If you've experienced back pain, we'd like to hear from you.

- What was the cause?
- What treatment did you have?
- Was the treatment effective, useless or did it make things worse?
- What type of health provider treated you (doctor, physiotherapist, chiropractor, osteopath, etc)?
- Did you see more than one health provider? If so, why?
- What advice, if any, were you given to prevent your back pain from recurring?
- If your back pain is chronic, have you been given advice about how to manage it?
- How has your back pain and treatment regimen affected your life?

Please write to **Back pain,** CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, fax us on (02) 9577 3377 or email us at backpain@choice.com.au. Thank you for your help.

Over 100,000 Australians have lost their money in fraudulent and illegal investments in the last 10 years. Here we review the latest investment news from the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) and give you tips on how to avoid investment pitfalls. For further information call the ASIC infoline on 1300 300 630 or check its website on www.asic.gov.au.

Calling for trouble

"Loans from $1000 to $50,000 ... Previous bad credit history and bankruptcies overcome. Sole parents and pensioners welcome."

Placed in various Australian newspapers, this ad targeted not only financially disadvantaged consumers in need of a personal loan, it also provided only one contact detail: a 190 number that charged $5 per minute. And worse, consumers who called this number weren't offered a loan, despite what the ad had led them to believe.

After a joint investigation by the ACCC and the Victorian Office of Fair Trading, the Federal Court in Melbourne stopped the service and recovered some of the call charges paid by consumers. The ACCC distributed this money to people who'd used the service.

Recently the Supreme Court of New South Wales placed another company offering a similar service in provisional liquidation. The company had generated $750,000 revenue before it was stopped.

190 number services

Numbers starting with 1900 or 1902 are used for telephone or fax-on-demand information services, including the time, weather, entering competitions and so on.

However, phony prize and vacation offers, deceptive loan promotions like the ones mentioned above and other rip-offs may also use these numbers. You're promised a product or service, but instead you might listen to a long recorded sales message and end up out of pocket with an astronomical phone bill and nothing else.

The companies providing 190 services are supposed to be bound by a Code of Practice set out by the Telephone Information Services Standard Council (TISSC), an independent regulator founded by the telephone information services industry. It prohibits:

- Ads that don't mention the call costs of the service.
- False, misleading or out-of-date information.
- The unnecessary prolonging of the call.

Also, with live services and recorded-message services costing more than 75 cents per call, you should hear a message advising you of the approximate call costs at the beginning of the call. You're charged either on a per minute basis, up to $5 a minute, or a fixed fee of up to $30 per call.

CHOICE advice

Our advice before calling any 190 number is to:

- Check the promotional material to find out how much you'll pay. If it doesn't tell you, don't use it.
- Consider whether the promised information is worth the cost.
- Get suspicious if after calling one 190 number you're asked to ring another 190 number.
- Trust your own common sense.

If you want to make sure a service is legitimate, contact TISSC by phoning 1300 139 955 (www.tissc.com.au). If you've used a 190 number and think you've been deceived or misled, contact the ACCC office in your state.

More information about 190 and other rip-offs and scams can be found in the free publication, *The little black book of scams*, available from the Office of Fair Trading/ Consumer Affairs in your state. Call Consumer Affairs on (02) 6263 4000 or go to its website: www.consumer.gov.au.

YOURletters

Ozone hole?

I would like to point out two errors in your November issue concerning UV radiation. First, in *World Consumer Snapshot*, you perpetuated the myth, which is damaging to our tourist industry, that there is an ozone hole over Australia. In fact, the average ozone in the atmosphere is a latitude-dependent amount, with a maximum around the latitudes of southern Australia that's more than over northern Europe.

Australia is more vulnerable to UV because, compared with the northern hemisphere, more of it reaches the ground due to our very clear atmosphere, lower cloud cover and higher sun angles. The Antarctic ozone hole (present for a couple of months in the spring) has little to do with it.

A similar misconception applies when comparing the 15+ and 30+ sunscreens. If your figures are correct, then the latter is indeed twice as good as the former, because it is what UV gets through that counts, not what is cut out, and 3% is half as much as 6%. The exam result analogy is incorrect because in that case it's the amount you get right, not the amount that gets past you, that counts.

Robert Scopes
Maleny, Qld

We checked with the University of New South Wales Institute of Environmental Studies, and found it is indeed incorrect to suggest that there's a permanent ozone hole over Australia. Occasionally, as the Antarctic ozone hole breaks up towards the end of spring, a section of ozone-depleted atmosphere may drift over southern Australia for a day or two. However, Australia's susceptibility to UV is generally not a consequence of ozone depletion, but of the conditions Mr Scopes describes in his letter.

As we mentioned in our November sunscreens article, there are arguments for and against a claim that SPF 30+ offers twice the protection of the old SPF 15+.

Skin cancer and the young

I would like to thank you for your excellent article, *Safe in the sun?* (November 1999), which addresses the need to raise awareness of skin cancer in young people.

I was only 23 when I was diagnosed with a malignant melanoma on my leg. I had to have a further two centimetres of tissue removed from the area, leaving a 7 cm scar and numbness due to nerve damage. The mole didn't itch and wasn't sore or scaly. It simply grew about one millimetre over a nine-month period. In fact, the mole was only removed as a precaution in the first place. I've had little exposure to the sun as a child and have always worn sunscreen and a hat.

I'm constantly being told by people that I'm too young to have had skin cancer — it's almost like they really don't believe that's what caused the scar. However, skin cancer is fast becoming a young person's cancer. It is vitally important that campaigns begin to target people in their 20s.

Kelly Smith
Newcastle, NSW

Tap timers in deep water?

I appreciated your article on tap timers (November 1999), but in my case it was 12 months too late.

We have a Hardie Pope electronic timer. As your report listed, it's very difficult to program and not at all intuitive. In general use it works fine, but there's one glaring fault that can cause a lot of damage to a property.

The timer relies on battery power to both open and close the flow of water. Once the valve is switched on and the batteries removed, the flow of water will continue forever — a runaway-train type of problem.

This is obviously not what any sensible person would do in practice. However, there's a better than 50% chance that when the batteries eventually fail it will be in the situation where the valve has been open — especially if the timer has been set to run for short times of five minutes and the batteries don't have much time to recover.

In our own case the timer didn't switch off one morning and ran for the next 20 hours — until we arrived home. In this case the batteries weren't flat, but considerable moisture had built up inside the battery compartment, possibly making the contacts the failing point.

There was no reference to this in the CHOICE report. Do the other brands of timer rely on energised solenoid action to turn off the water?

Andrew Caris
Via Internet

On receiving this letter we tested all the battery-operated models in the November test report for this problem and found the same result as Mr Caris — if the battery fails while the tap timer is on, the water can run forever.

This is clearly a real concern, especially for those who use tap timers to conserve water, and it will certainly be an issue addressed in future tests of tap timers. The best advice the CHOICE technical team can offer is to change the batteries regularly if you use your tap timer all the time. Of course, if you're using the timer to water the garden while you're on holiday, you're not going to be around to keep an eye on things and such advice is of little comfort. All you can do is fit new batteries before going away.

Over to you, manufacturers.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

We want to hear from you — your experiences help our research and often let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. To thank you for writing to us, *Your Letters* awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'. This month's winner, Andrew Caris, receives *Sustainable House*, or any other book of his choice from *Consumer Bookshelf*, pages 40–42.

We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract. See page 2 for how to reach us.

The breakfast serial?

Choosing a breakfast cereal doesn't have to be a drama — use this guide.

IN BRIEF

- Over 120 breakfast cereals are rated (pages 10 to 13). There are plenty of good ones to choose from, including wheat biscuits, bran cereals, rolled oats and wholegrain cereals. However, a third of the cereals are either too low in fibre or too high in fat for us to recommend for everyday eating.
- Beware of marketing hype — to buy a healthy cereal use our quick and easy *Shopper's guide*, below right.

YOUR MOTHER ALWAYS said breakfast was the most important meal of the day. And she was right: having breakfast is definitely a good idea.

There's some evidence that for kids, eating breakfast improves their learning ability. For kids and adults alike, eating breakfast can help to control weight by preventing hunger and overeating later in the day.

But *what* you eat for breakfast is important. The best choice is something high in both carbohydrate and fibre, and low in fat. Breakfast cereal can fit the bill perfectly — as long as it still resembles its cereal starting point. Once it's stripped, puffed, flaked, sugared or salted it might well be a different matter.

To help you pick a nutritional winner we've rated over 120 of them. For the results see pages 10 to 13.

What's important?

The following are the main factors to consider when choosing a cereal.

■ **Dietary fibre:** Cereal grains are high in fibre, but some breakfast cereals are almost stripped of it during processing. As most Australians don't eat enough fibre, we weighted that most heavily when rating the cereals — you should be able to rely on your cereal to deliver a decent whack of your daily fibre needs. We used a cut-off point for fibre of 5%; below that, we wouldn't recommend the cereals for everyday eating. See *Fibre facts*, right, for more.

■ **Fat:** In their natural state, cereals contain almost no fat, but some baked and toasted breakfast cereals have substantial amounts added (the fat makes the cereals crunchy). We used a cut-off point for fat content of 9% — above that, we wouldn't recommend the cereals for everyday eating.

■ **Sugar:** There's almost no sugar in cereal grains — that is, until they've been highly processed and had large amounts added. Sugar has long had a bad reputation, but its only proven faults are contributing to tooth decay and adding nothing more than 'empty calories' to a food (it doesn't bring nutrients like fibre, vitamins or minerals with it, for example).

The new buzzword connected to sugar is the glycaemic index (GI) — you might have heard of it. Briefly, it's to do with the rate at which a food raises your blood glucose level. Taking the GI of a food into account (if it's known) may be worthwhile for dieters, athletes and people with diabetes, but for the average individual it's unlikely to be a key factor in choosing a breakfast cereal. (For more on the GI see *Sugar: no longer a bad guy?*, CHOICE, September 1998.)

We didn't include sugar in the rating criteria for cereals, but we've highlighted those with a high sugar

The grain, the whole grain and nothing but...

It's better to choose cereals made primarily from whole grain (that is, the entire edible part of any grain, including the germ, endosperm and bran) rather than refined grains, because they haven't been denuded of fibre, vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals.

Phytochemicals are natural plant substances that may provide protection against certain diseases, such as some cancers and heart disease (for more on phytochemicals — what foods they're in and what they do — see *Antioxidants: health in a pill?*, CHOICE, June 1999).

Some fibre, vitamins and minerals are often added back into breakfast cereals, which compensates to some extent for the losses due to refining, but it's impossible to add the mix of phytochemicals that's lost in the processing.

content so you can avoid them if you want to.

■ **Salt:** Large amounts of salt are added to some cereals during processing. Salt (or more specifically its sodium component) is linked to high blood pressure in about 10% of the population, which in turn is linked to stroke and heart disease, so it's wise to keep your intake down. This is particularly important in older people (65 and over), as blood pressure increases with age. The Australian dietary guidelines for both adults and children recommend low-salt foods.

We didn't include salt content in the rating criteria for cereals, but we've highlighted those high in salt so you can avoid them if you wish.

■ **Vitamins and minerals:** Most cereals have vitamins and minerals added (some are lost during processing, others were never there in significant amounts). Cereals can be an important source of vitamins and minerals, particularly iron, and more recently folate. However, the vitamin and mineral content wouldn't be a primary reason for choosing one cereal over another (unless you're choosing between two cereals that are otherwise nutritionally similar in terms of fibre, fat and other key nutrients), so we didn't use it in the rating criteria.

■ **'Functional' ingredients** : Manufacturers have been adding so-called functional ingredients (claimed to have a positive impact on your health, physical performance or state of mind) to cereals and other foods for years. Oat bran in cereal is a good example — oat bran has cholesterol-lowering properties. Now they're really going 'functional' in earnest. **UNCLE TOBYS** recently launched two new cereals that are classic examples (see *Breakfast cereal on prescription?*, page 13, for more on this). While these functional ingredients may be a bonus, you'd be missing the point to consider them a key factor in choosing a cereal.

Fibre facts

If you go for a high-fibre cereal based on whole wheat or wheat bran you'll be getting a lot of **insoluble fibre** — the type that helps prevent constipation and related bowel disorders.

If you go for a cereal based on oats (rolled oats, muesli or cereals with oat bran in them, for example) you'll be getting more **soluble fibre.** Other sources of soluble fibre include gums in barley and legumes (beans, lentils and chickpeas) and pectin in fruit. Along with insoluble fibre, it can help prevent constipation, but it also has a cholesterol-lowering effect.

To have a significant impact on cholesterol levels, though, you need to eat a lot of soluble fibre. While a breakfast cereal rich in soluble fibre probably won't be enough on its own, it'll definitely give you a head start.

Oat bran and barley bran are more concentrated sources of soluble fibre than porridge or muesli, but it's hard to eat a lot of them — try sprinkling a couple of tablespoons on top of your usual cereal instead. Some brands of breakfast cereal list their soluble fibre content on the label so you can check how much you're getting.

Of the cereals we looked at that listed it, the highest in soluble fibre was **KELLOGG'S Guardian. UNCLE TOBYS Healthwise for improved heart health** was the second highest.

A couple of breakfast cereals (**UNCLE TOBYS Healthwise for improved bowel & digestive health** and **UNCLE TOBYS Honey Grinners**) contain **resistant starch** (in a form called Hi-maize) — a type of starch that's thought to act like fibre in the body, improving bowel and digestive health and protecting against bowel cancer.

Get up and go?

We've all heard of a liquid lunch, but now there's a liquid breakfast — it's from Sanitarium and it's called Up & Go (it comes in four flavours). If you drink a 250 mL container you'll be getting 3.5 g of fibre, 3.8 g of fat, 15.5 g of sugar, 145 mg of sodium and 55% of your daily calcium needs — overall, quite a good nutritional profile.

But even though it claims to have the same amount of fibre as two Weet-Bix, it's a different type of fibre (largely resistant starch and soluble fibre as opposed to the insoluble fibre in Weet-Bix — see *Fibre facts*, left). So don't expect the same effect — it probably won't be as good in the bowel department. And you'll be missing out on the valuable mix of phytochemicals you'd get from eating a wholegrain cereal (see *The grain, the whole grain and nothing but ...*, far left).

Shopper's guide

■ Don't be fooled by marketing hype and claims on the label. Always go straight to the nutrition panel to evaluate how healthy the cereal is.

■ Use the 'per 100 g' amount when evaluating the cereal, and when comparing products. The serving size is only a guide — it's the average serving size, but may not be the size you eat.

■ Some cereals can be high in fat, so go to the fat figure on the nutrition panel first. If it's got more than about 9 g of fat per 100 g, it's not a good choice. A food called low-fat must have less than 3 g of fat per 100 g.

■ Generally, the higher the fibre, the better. Choose a cereal with *at least* 5 g of fibre per 100 g.

■ If you don't want much sugar in your cereal, go for ones with less than about 14 g per 100 g, which is about a teaspoon of sugar in a 30 g serve.

■ Sodium should be less than 600 mg per 100 g. A claimed low-salt food must have less than 120 mg per 100 g and a reduced-salt food less than 600 mg per 100 g.

■ Read the ingredients list, which is in order of quantity, from most to least. It's useful for identifying sources of added fat (for example, the presence of palm or coconut oil tells you that the product's got saturated fat in it), sugars (such as honey, malt, glucose syrup) and salt. It can also tell you when the fat is the 'healthy' kind (like in nuts and seeds) or when the sugar comes from fruit.

■ Look for a cereal that contains the word "whole" in the first ingredient. These cereals are less processed and contain more of the natural ingredients found in the grain, including vitamins, minerals and phytochemicals (for more on this see *The grain, the whole grain and nothing but...*, left).

Munching muesli

Muesli has a wholesome image, and it can live up to it if you choose the right one. But in general *toasted* muesli is too high in fat to be recommended as an everyday choice, containing on average about 13%. The fat comes from vegetable oil, added to make the muesli crunchy.

Natural muesli is high in fibre and usually lower in fat than toasted, although it does contain more than most other cereals (around 9% on average) due to the nuts and seeds. If you're watching the fat in the rest of your diet the small amount of 'healthy' fat from these sources won't be a problem. Go for the lowest fat content you can find.

Muesli is heavier than most other cereals, so if you fill your bowl to the same level as you would with, say, cornflakes, you'll be eating more in weight, which means more of everything, including fat and calories.

The cereal ratings

The cereals are listed within types, ranked in order of highest to lowest fibre content, with a cut-off point below which we wouldn't recommend them as an everyday choice (based on their fibre or fat content). We've highlighted cereals with a high sugar or salt content in case you'd prefer to avoid them.

How to use the guide

Adults — choose cereals that are very high or high in fibre with an acceptable level of fat (9% or less). You can tell which these are from the colour codes, right.
Children — go for high or at least moderate fibre content. Don't choose a cereal that's low in fibre or high in fat for everyday eating.

■ **Fibre:** Health experts recommend that we aim for at least 30 g of dietary fibre a day, but most people eat far less than this. We've rated the fibre levels as follows:

Very high fibre: at least 20% fibre (6 g of fibre in a 30 g serve).
High fibre: at least 10% fibre.
Moderate fibre: at least 5% fibre.
Low fibre: less than 5%. Not recommended for everyday eating.

■ **Fat:** Eating too much fat is a major cause of obesity and can also increase your risk of heart disease (particularly saturated fat), high blood pressure, diabetes, gallstones and some types of cancer. We've rated the fat levels as follows:

Acceptable fat: 9% or less.

Biscuits

You can't go wrong if you choose one of these. They're minimally processed, high in fibre, contain very little fat and sugar and not much salt. If you choose one of the biscuits with added oat bran you'll boost your soluble fibre intake (for more on soluble fibre and its health effects, see *Fibre facts*, page 9).

	Fibre (%)	Fat (%)
SANITARIUM Weet-Bix Hi Bran	18	6
BI-LO Wheat Biscuits	12	3
BLACK & GOLD Breakfast Wheat Biscuits	12	3
HOME BRAND Wheat Biscuits	12	3
NO FRILLS Wheat Biscuits **(A)**	12	3
UNCLE TOBYS Vita Brits	12	2
FARMLAND Organic Wheat Biscuits	11	2
IGA Organic Wheat Biscuits **(B)**	11	2
KELLOGG'S Golden Wheats	11	1
SANITARIUM Weet-Bix	11	1
SANITARIUM Weet-Bix Oat Bran	11	2
SANITARIUM Good Start	10	5

Bites

Most of these are mini versions of the biscuit type, above, with added fruit and fruit flavours. Because they have less fibre, they're not generally as good a choice as the regular wheat biscuits (except for the plain mini-wheats). They've also got more sugar, but if you eat these fruit-filled bites instead of adding a teaspoon of sugar to your regular biscuits, choosing between the two types is much of a muchness (apart from the ones highlighted as being high in sugar).

	Fibre (%)	Fat (%)	
KELLOGG'S Mini-Wheats Whole Wheat	12	1	
KELLOGG'S Mini-Wheats Apricot Flavour	9	1	
KELLOGG'S Mini-Wheats Blackcurrant Flavour	9	1	
KELLOGG'S Mini-Wheats Strawberry Flavour	9	1	
SANITARIUM Fruity Bix Apricot	9	1	
SANITARIUM Fruity Bix Tropical	9	1	
SANITARIUM Fruity Bix Wild Berry	9	1	
UNCLE TOBYS Apricot Flavoured Fruity Bites	9	1	*
UNCLE TOBYS Wild Berry Flavoured Fruity Bites	9	2	*
UNCLE TOBYS Wheat Bites	8	2	

* Some of the sugar is from fruit.

High fat: more than 9%. Not recommended for everyday eating.

■ **High in sugar:** The Dietary Guidelines for Australians recommend eating only a moderate amount of sugar and foods with added sugar. The main types of sugar in breakfast cereal include sucrose (table sugar) and fructose (mainly found in fruit and fruit juice). Of the cereals that are high in sugar, we've highlighted those (*) where fruit sugar contributes to the total. The fruit brings fibre, vitamins and minerals with it, but like any sugar can be a factor in tooth decay.

27% or more total sugars (that's equivalent to two teaspoons in a 30 g serve).

40% or more total sugars (equivalent to three teaspoons in a 30 g serve).

■ **High in sodium:** This is the constituent of salt you need to watch. The minimum recommended daily intake for sodium is 900 mg; the maximum is 2300 mg.

600–800 mg of sodium per 100 g (equivalent to around 20% of the lower recommended daily intake in a 30 g serve).

800 mg or more of sodium per 100 g (equivalent to around 27% of the lower recommended daily intake in a 30 g serve).

Footnotes to all ratings lists:

(A) Available in NSW, Qld, SA and Vic.
(B) Available in NSW, Qld and Vic.
(C) Available in NSW, Tasmania and Vic.
(D) Available in NSW, SA and Vic.
(E) Available in NSW, Qld, SA, Vic and WA.
(F) Available in NSW and Vic.

Flakes, bubbles and puffs

This type incorporates a range of cereals from rice pops and cornflakes to products that are made up of a combination of flakes, puffs and bubbles (and made from various grains, including wheat, oats and rice) with added fruit or nuts.

Most of these 'combination' cereals are a good choice, being a high or a moderate source of fibre. And there's a wide range to choose from, so there should be a cereal for most tastes in this group.

The top three contain 'functional' ingredients. For more on this see *Breakfast cereal on prescription?*, page 13.

Nutritionally, the cornflakes and rice pops/bubbles are too low in fibre to be recommended as your staple cereal, and mostly they're high in salt (even though **KELLOGG'S** has reduced the salt content of its **Corn Flakes** and **Rice Bubbles** since we last tested). However, they're a good source of complex carbohydrate, with added vitamins (B_1, B_2, niacin and sometimes folate) and minerals (iron). So they're definitely a better start to the day than having no breakfast at all.

	Fibre (%)	Fat (%)	
UNCLE TOBYS Healthwise for improved bowel & digestive health	21	3	
KELLOGG'S Guardian	17	1	
UNCLE TOBYS Healthwise for improved heart health	16	6	
UNCLE TOBYS Fibreplus	15	3	
IGA Wheat Flakes **(B)**	12	1	
UNCLE TOBYS The Original Weeties	12	2	
UNCLE TOBYS Fruit 'n' Nut Weeties	11	3	
LOWAN MultiFlakes with Fruit & Nuts **(C)**	10	5	
UNCLE TOBYS Muesli Flakes	10	2	
UNCLE TOBYS Nut Feast	10	8	
HUBBARDS Very Fruitful Flakes **(A)**	9	2	
KELLOGG'S Puffed Wheat	9	2	
LOWAN MultiFlakes with Tropical Fruit **(C)**	9	7	
KELLOGG'S Just Right	8	2	
KELLOGG'S Just Right Just Grains	8	1	
LOWAN Flake Medley with Wild Berries **(C)**	8	3	
SANITARIUM Puffed Wheat	7	1	
UNCLE TOBYS Oat Flakes	7	4	
UNCLE TOBYS Rice Crispies	5	2	
Not recommended for everyday eating:			
BI-LO Rice Pops	4	1	
BLACK & GOLD Corn Flakes	4	1	
HOME BRAND Rice Pops	4	1	
HUBBARDS Berry Berry Bubbles **(A)**	4	1	
IGA Corn Flakes **(B)**	4	1	
KORNIE FOOD COMPANY Corn Flakes	4	1	
LOWAN Bubbles **(C)**	4	1	
UNCLE TOBYS Fruit Feast	4	3	
HOME BRAND Corn Flakes	3	1	
HOME BRAND Special Flakes	3	1	
KELLOGG'S Corn Flakes	3	0.2	
NO FRILLS Corn Flakes **(A)**	3	1	
SANITARIUM Corn Flakes	3	0.4	
FIRST CHOICE Rice Pops **(A)**	2	0.3	
KELLOGG'S Crispix	2	0.3	
NO FRILLS Rice Pops **(A)**	2	1	
SANITARIUM Ricies	2	0.4	
KELLOGG'S Rice Bubbles	1	0.3	
KELLOGG'S Corn Pops	0	0.3	

New kid on the block

Amaranth grain is high in fibre, relatively low in fat, and contains no sugar and next to no salt. There's some evidence that it can lower cholesterol, so if you're looking for something new, it's well worth a try. Serving suggestions include eating it with milk (like any other cereal), as a topping on your cereal, or mixed with yoghurt.

AMARANTH Breakfast Cereal

Fibre (%)	Fat (%)
11	6

* Some of the sugar is from fruit.

'Lite'

This type is marketed as 'lite' or low in fat (which a lot of breakfast cereals are anyway) and generally gives the impression that they're good for people trying to lose weight. Mostly they *are* good choices, with high or moderate amounts of fibre and low in fat. But we're curious about what **HUBBARDS Fruitful Lite** is light in — not fat, anyway. This is an example of why it's a bad idea to take names or claims at face value. Always check the nutrition panel.

	Fibre (%)	Fat (%)	
SANITARIUM Lite-Bix	12	1	
WEIGHT WATCHERS Fruit & Fibre cereal **(C)**	12	3	
FIRST CHOICE Light 'n' Fruity **(A)**	11	4	
FIRST CHOICE Lite & Right **(B)**	10	2	
HUBBARDS Fruitful Lite **(A)**	10	9	*
UNCLE TOBYS Lite Start	10	2	
WEIGHT WATCHERS Tropicana **(C)**	10	1	
FREEDOM FOODS All Natural Hi-Lite Cereal	8	2	
SANITARIUM Light n Tasty	7	2	
Not recommended for everyday eating:			
KELLOGG'S Special K	4	0.4	

* Some of the sugar is from fruit.

Oats

It's hard to beat good old-fashioned porridge. You get the benefit of fibre (including soluble fibre) and the only sugar and salt is what you add. However, some of these oat-based cereals have a lot of fat added to make them crunchy. **NATURE'S SOURCE Strawberry and Yoghurt** (with a base of oat and rice clusters) has the equal highest fat content of all the cereals we looked at (see *Soy*, right, for the other).

	Fibre (%)	Fat (%)	
NORGANIC Crunchola Apple Blueberry	14	<1	
NATURE'S SOURCE Tropical Cluster	11	9	
ROLLED OATS**	10	8	
LOWAN OatBuds with sultanas **(C)**	8	2	
Not recommended for everyday eating:			
NATURE'S SOURCE Strawberry & yoghurt	10	17	
HUBBARDS Fruitful **(A)**	8	13	
KELLOGG'S Oat 'n Honey Bake	8	14	
UNCLE TOBYS Fruit&Oat Crunch	7	15	
LOWAN Oat & Wheat Honey cereal **(C)**	4	1	

** There are many different brands of rolled oats as well as numerous different types — for example, quick cooking, one-minute and traditional. Nutritionally, they're all very similar.

Aimed at your kids

Most of these cereals are nutritional losers, being highly processed, high in sugar (and some also high in salt) and low in fibre. If you can't get your kids to eat anything else, take comfort in that the majority of manufacturers add vitamins and minerals to make them somewhat more worthwhile for children, and if they eat them with milk they'll be getting some calcium as well.

	Fibre (%)	Fat (%)	
UNCLE TOBYS Honey Grinners	10	3	
FIRST CHOICE Honey Nutz Flakes **(A)**	6	3	
KELLOGG'S Honey-Smacks	6	1	
SANITARIUM Honey Weets	6	1	
FIRST CHOICE Honey Pops **(D)**	5	2	
UNCLE TOBYS Choc Dot Crispies	5	3	
Not recommended for everyday eating:			
BLACK & GOLD Fruity Rings **(E)**	4	3	
HOME BRAND Fruiti Rings	4	2	
NO FRILLS Fruit Flavoured Rings **(E)**	4	3	
BLACK & GOLD Cocoa Puffs **(D)**	3	4	
KELLOGG'S Crunchy Nut Corn Flakes	3	5	
FIRST CHOICE Coco Puffs **(B)**	2	0.3	
KELLOGG'S Froot Loops	2	2	
KELLOGG'S Frosties	2	0.1	
LOWAN Cocoa Bombs **(C)**	2	2	
KELLOGG'S Coco Pops	1	0.3	
KELLOGG'S Honey Rice Bubbles	1	0.2	
NO FRILLS Cocoa Puffs **(A)**	0	3	

Sporty image

These cereals are more about marketing and creating a sporty image that are real difference in nutritional value compared with a lot of other regular cereals. Some contain more sugar (eg. Nutri-Grain), which isn't a bad thing if you're active and use a lot of energy, but there are plenty of better choices around for the average person.

	Fibre (%)	Fat (%)	
UNCLE TOBYS Sportsplus	9	3	
UNCLE TOBYS Team Australia	8	3	
KELLOGG'S Sustain	7	3	
Not recommended for everyday eating:			
KELLOGG'S Nutri-Grain	4	1	
HOME BRAND Crunchi Grain	3	2	

Bran

Bran cereals are a good source of fibre, particularly the wheat bran ones, but are generally higher in salt than some other high-fibre cereals. However, KELLOGG'S and UNCLE TOBYS have made efforts to reduce the salt content of some of their bran cereals in the last few years. The 60% reduction in salt content of **KELLOGG'S All-Bran** is particularly impressive.

Some of the bran cereals are high in sugar because they contain dried fruit, such as sultanas (the sugar is mainly fructose from the fruit), but they're also high in fibre so are still a good choice.

If you're looking for a cereal to keep you regular, go for wheat bran — oat bran isn't quite as effective in that department.

	Fibre (%)	Fat (%)	
UNCLE TOBYS BranPlus	46	3	
NO FRILLS Just Bran **(A)**	34	3	
LOWAN MultiBran **(C)**	32	3	
KELLOGG'S All-Bran	30	3	
KELLOGG'S Bran Flakes	19	2	
FIRST CHOICE Bran & Sultanas **(F)**	18	2	*
KELLOGG'S All-Bran Fruit 'n Oats	18	4	
HOME BRAND Sultana & Bran	17	2	
NO FRILLS Sultanas & Bran **(A)**	17	2	
SAVINGS Bran & Sultana's Breakfast Cereal	17	2	
PURINA Fruit 'N' Bran Flakes	16	2	*
KELLOGG'S Sultana Bran	15	1	
UNCLE TOBYS Sultanas 'n' WheatBran	15	3	*
UNCLE TOBYS Crunchy Oat Bran with Fruit	13	4	
LOWAN Oat Bran Breakfast Cereal **(C)**	10	4	
LOWAN Oat Bran & Fruit **(C)**	8	4	*

* Some of the sugar is from fruit.

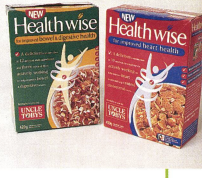
Soy

Research suggests that soy may help to protect against heart disease and hormone-related cancers (breast and prostate), as well as alleviating menopausal symptoms in women.

The experts agree that 25 g of soy a day (as part of a diet that's low in saturated fat and cholesterol) may reduce the risk of heart disease. They're still working on how much is likely to be needed for the other health benefits. But, in the meantime, eating a diet that contains soy in a number of forms (such as soy milk, tofu, bread and breakfast cereals) won't do any harm and may do some good.

	Fibre (%)	Fat (%)
VOGEL'S Soy & Linseed Wheat Bran Cereal	30	2
VOGEL'S Soy & Linseed Soy-Tana	20	2
SANITARIUM Weet-Bix Hi Bran & Soy	17	6
KELLOGG'S All-Bran Soy 'n Fibre	11	2
LOWAN Soy Flakes with Apricot & Almond **(C)**	9	3
Not recommended for everyday eating:		
SUNSOL Phyto-Soy Breakfast Start **(B)**	13	17

Breakfast cereal on prescription?



The new **UNCLE TOBYS Healthwise** breakfast cereals look more like you should be buying them from the chemist than the supermarket, with their promises to improve your heart health and control cholesterol (the red box of cereal) or to improve your bowel and digestive health (the green box). If there was a prize for how many times you could ignore our food standards code on one box of cereal, **UNCLE TOBYS** would win hands down — we've counted over a dozen arguable breaches on each box!

Our Food Standards Code doesn't allow claims that a food can cure or prevent a disease (though this is currently being reviewed). Claims that a food 'improves' your heart health or your bowel and digestive health aren't, strictly speaking, saying the products can 'cure' or 'prevent' disease, but there's a strong implication that they can. While adhering to the letter of the law, **UNCLE TOBYS** is definitely not sticking to its spirit.

Even the name of the cereal, **Healthwise**, is iffy — you're not allowed to use the word 'health' as part of or in conjunction with the name of the food. But what we dislike the most is the spiel on the side panel of the box, where it says **UNCLE TOBYS'** new range of "targeted health" cereals "provide everyday solutions for your individual health needs". This implies that whatever your individual medical complaint, **UNCLE TOBYS** has a "targeted" cereal that will treat it. We think it's misleading to suggest that the use of an individual food can lead to a reduction in your risk of disease — it's your total diet and lifetyle habits that really count.

It's the job of the state and territory health departments to enforce the Food Standards Code, but unfortunately when it comes to labelling issues there's rarely any action — the health departments don't have enough resources, so food labelling issues tend to take a back seat to public health and safety. But happily, on this occasion NSW Health has taken it on board — it's in the middle of talks with **UNCLE TOBYS**. We think it deserves a pat on the back. And an industry competitor has taken **UNCLE TOBYS** to court. The case has been adjourned till June so we won't be able to tell you the outcome till then.

Cheaper cleaning?

Have you come across what look like your normal cleaning products in bargain or discount stores and wondered how they can be so much cheaper than in the supermarket? Here's how.

IN BRIEF

■ Imported cleaning products sharing a brand name with local items are often formulated for the specific conditions of their country of origin. That might make them work better under conditions here (if our water is softer, say), or sometimes worse. Often they're cheap enough for it to be worth buying to try.

THE PRICE OF CDs HAS HOGGED PUBLIC attention regarding parallel imports, but the impact of changes to the Copyright Act that have loosened the regulations go far beyond that, and affect just about anything you can think of.

Parallel imports are goods imported directly from overseas without going through a local distributor. As the debate over CDs demonstrated, parallel importing is supposed to make a greater variety of goods available — and at cheaper prices, through the increased competition.

In the past, local distributors have been able to prevent parallel importation by enforcing a copyright on the artwork on the labelling of some products. But as of January, this is no longer the case. While this might mean a better choice for consumers regarding product range and price, it also raises issues of 'buyer beware'.

The Attorney-General's Department reckons that scrapping those import restrictions won't leave consumers susceptible to products of poor quality or inadequate health and safety standards, because retailers of such goods will still be subject to the same standards required of anyone selling a local product.

Imported cleaning products may well be cheap enough to make it worth trying them over their locally made counterparts.

But will it work?

So if it's true that you won't have to worry about health, safety or quality problems with parallel imports, it comes down to whether they'll work OK in Australian conditions. For example, some imported household detergents and cleaning products that share the same name as their local competitors may appear exactly the same, with familiar logos and labels. Their formulations, however, may differ markedly and you won't know because the ingredients aren't required to be listed.

When our buyers went in search of examples, the first thing they noticed was the price — the majority of imports were considerably, and attractively, cheaper than the local product.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, the general consensus from local manufacturers was that the formulas do differ, largely (they say) because the products are made specifically to suit conditions in their country of origin. For example, Cussons confirmed that the British version of its Morning Fresh dishwashing liquid was different from the local product. Conditions such as water hardness vary around the world, so detergents are formulated differently to achieve optimum performance in their local markets. However, since most Australian water is softer than most UK water, you may well find it works just fine in many places here.

Lever Rexona, the local manufacturer of Jif, thinks the performance of a Malaysian import found by our buyers would probably be comparable to the local product, as both share the same active ingredients and abrasives.

A different story with other products?

If you save a few dollars on a cleaning product and are disappointed with its performance, there's little harm done: you just won't buy it again. The problem could be worse, though, if parallel importing of electrical goods becomes widespread. The purchase price might be cheaper, but is there any guarantee you'll be able to get after-sales service, repairs or parts? The local distributor may not be helpful since you didn't buy the product from it.

So if you want to save a bit of money, trying out things like parallel-import cleaning products may be worthwhile. For other goods, think first whether you're likely to need help with them later. ❑

The Piggy Awards

- **Best financial institutions** (of those in the survey): **NSW TEACHERS CREDIT UNION** (89% of customers very satisfied). **BENDIGO BANK** (72% of customers very satisfied). **BANK OF QUEENSLAND** (50% of customers very satisfied).
- **Greatest nosedive**: **BANK OF MELBOURNE**. In our last survey, **BANK OF MELBOURNE** topped the list for the best regional bank, with 48% of its customers very satisfied. This time around it's plummeted to 14%. Could the **WESTPAC** merger have affected the results?
- **You treat me badly**: **ANZ**. Half of its customers feel they're treated worse than five years ago. The rest of the big four weren't too far behind (see Figure 1, page 16).
- **Four of a kind**: **ANZ, COMMONWEALTH, NATIONAL** and **WESTPAC**. None of the big four was significantly better or worse than the others overall (see Figure 2, page 16). Their results for specific aspects of banking were also very similar — and generally poor (see Table 1, page 17). Have they all aspired to the lowest common denominator?

Presenting: the CHOICE 'Piggy Bank' awards

Forget the Oscars, we've got the Piggies.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF YOUR bank? Last year 5670 CHOICE readers gave us their opinion. According to the results, over a third of you feel you're treated worse now than five years ago.

As **Figure 1** (overleaf) shows, customers of some large banks in particular feel this way. In fact, for the big four (**ANZ, COMMONWEALTH, NATIONAL** and **WESTPAC**) on average only 10% of respondents think they're treated 'better' or 'much better' than five years ago. So the big four made a total of $29 billion in profit over the last five years with little or no perceived improvement for consumers.

The big four banks were all close to the bottom of the heap when it came to 'very satisfied' customers, and **Figure 2** (overleaf) shows there's little to choose between them.

Figure 2 also shows that the most satisfied customers of smaller banks were those with **BANK OF QUEENSLAND** and **BENDIGO BANK**.

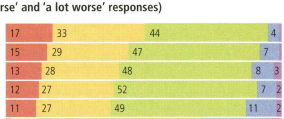
What makes these two institutions stand out from the crowd? They're the only two regional banks in the survey that haven't been affected by a merger in recent years.

IN BRIEF

- The bigger the institution, the less you like it. Credit union customers were consistently more satisfied than customers of large banks.
- Fees remain a big issue. The more it costs, the less satisfied you are.
- You find it hard to tell which accounts would suit you, and one fifth of you are currently exempt from fees because of your home loan or because you have another account with the bank. These two factors may help explain why, despite obvious dissatisfaction, few readers have changed their account.
- If you want to change your account, check out our advice on how to do it right (see *Beating the banks*, page 19).

Figure 1: "Compared to five years ago, how well do you think your institution treats you as a customer?"

(In order of combined 'worse' and 'a lot worse' responses)

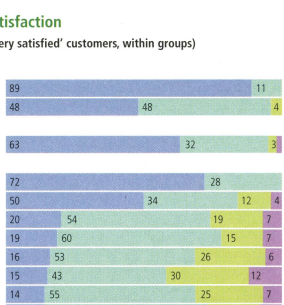


Numbers in brackets indicate the number of responses.

A lot worse | Worse | About the same | Better | A lot better

Figure 2: Overall satisfaction

(institutions in order of 'very satisfied' customers, within groups)


Credit unions
NSW TEACHERS (70) (A) 89 11
CREDIT UNION AUSTRALIA (52) 48 48 4
Building societies
Overall (166) (B) 63 32 3 2
Smaller banks
BENDIGO (50) 72 28
BANK OF QUEENSLAND (50) 50 34 12 4
SUNCORP-METWAY (192) 20 54 19 7
BANK SA (62) 19 60 15 7
BANKWEST (109) 16 53 26 6
COLONIAL STATE (164) 15 43 30 12
BANK OF MELBOURNE (279) 14 55 25 7
CHALLENGE (88) 14 59 19 8
ST GEORGE (466) 14 55 24 7
Large banks
NATIONAL (672) 15 58 22 5
COMMONWEALTH (1299) 13 59 23 6
ANZ (587) 11 60 23 6
WESTPAC (431) 10 54 31 6

Very satisfied | Fairly satisfied | Somewhat dissatisfied | Very dissatisfied

Numbers in brackets are the number of people who responded for each institution.
(A) Membership is limited to people who are members of the NSW Teachers Federation, school administration or support employees who are members of their union, teaching students and their families.
(B) We didn't receive enough responses to report on individual building societies.

The people's choice

BENDIGO BANK also runs a community banking program that supplies face-to-face banking based on what people want. Local consumers, having raised money for funding, become shareholders in a community bank; in return, BENDIGO BANK provides the use of its banking licence, products and staff training. The bank's structure and branch hours depend on community needs. Currently there are community banks in NSW, SA, Victoria and WA. For more information call 1300 361 339 or go to www.benbank.com.au/community.

One reader was also happy with BENDIGO BANK's service for remote consumers. "BENDIGO BANK appoints a personal banker to remote customers. This has allowed me to create a strong personal relationship with a bank that I have never set foot in. I couldn't be happier and it's as good as having my own branch."

Small can be beautiful

Figure 2 clearly shows that respondents from credit unions and building societies are significantly more satisfied than average with their institution's overall performance.

One example of the considerable gulf between large banks and other institutions is how satisfied people are with their institution's explanation of and information about fees. Only 5% of customers of large banks are very satisfied; for smaller banks the figure is around 8%. But for credit unions and building societies the figures are 35% and 27% respectively.

When asked to comment on the statement, "It's easy to work out which banking product is best for me", 34% of credit union and 37% of building society customers agreed or strongly agreed — whereas only 20% of large bank customers and 22% of small bank customers agreed.

Highlights and lowlights

We also asked consumers how they felt about using branches, ATMs, EFTPOS, phone and Internet banking (see **Table 1**: Satisfaction with aspects of bank services, right).

Significantly more credit union customers and

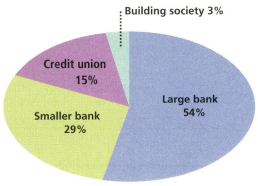
(continued on page 18)

Our survey

In October 1999 we asked 15,000 CHOICE subscribers to tell us what they thought of their financial institution; 5670 people responded — thanks to all of you. This builds on our survey conducted in September 1997, reported in CHOICE, March 1998.

We've reported on the number of institutions for which we had 50 or more responses. As you can see, this covered the four main banks and a large number of smaller banks. However, we had fewer reports on building societies and credit unions and so are only able to give information about two individual credit unions and no individual building societies.

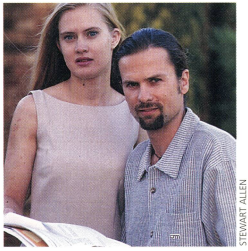
Where you bank



TITANIC LOAN TROUBLE

Roman and Davina of Kingsley, WA, have had their share of problems with their home loan. In fact they say it's been a nightmare from the pre-approval stage.

"Sure, the phone banking, phone assistance, Internet banking and over-the-counter customer dealings are excellent, very polite and helpful, but these staff are just the well-trained front line. The rigidity and lack of service 'behind the line' is unbelievable and to make even basic changes has been impossible."



STEWART ALLEN

Table 1. Satisfaction with aspects of bank services

	% VERY SATISFIED				
	Average	Credit unions	Building societies	Smaller banks	Large banks
BRANCHES					
Number of locations	19	17	34	19	19
Staff knowledge	18	44	45	15	11
Staff courtesy	32	64	66	30	23
Ability to carry out instructions	22	49	52	21	14
Opening hours	17	34	48	25	7
Queue length	11	40	35	9	5
Fees	11	41	35	8	4
ATMs					
Number of locations	19	42	26	16	15
Reliability	23	46	38	21	18
Fees	12	36	22	9	6
CHEQUES					
Clearance time	9	27	24	5	5
Fees	11	35	26	7	5
TELEPHONE BANKING					
Clear instructions	29	51	na	25	25
Operator support	21	40	na	20	17
Fees	18	48	na	14	11
INTERNET BANKING					
Variety of services	17	na	na	16	17
Clear instructions	19	na	na	19	18
Operator support	9	na	na	6	9
Fees	16	na	na	13	16
OVERALL SATISFACTION	24	66	63	20	13

na Not applicable — not enough responses for valid analysis.

Significantly higher percentage than average of very satisfied customers.

Significantly lower percentage than average of very satisfied customers.

- When it comes to the big four, ANZ had significantly fewer customers than average who were very satisfied with the number of both branch and ATM locations, whereas significantly more COMMONWEALTH customers were very satisfied with these aspects.
- ST GEORGE rates a mention: of the smaller banks it had the least 'very satisfied' customers for ATM reliability, cheque clearance time and telephone banking operator support.
- Despite its nosedive since the last survey, BANK OF MELBOURNE still had significantly more customers than average who were very satisfied with opening hours and telephone banking operator support than the other smaller banks.
- COLONIAL STATE presents a curious banking experience: if you can find a branch you might not be standing in a queue for long, but you might not be able to make yourself understood either. Compared to the average for the smaller banks it had the fewest customers satisfied with the number of branches, the most satisfied with queue lengths and the fewest satisfied with the staff's ability to carry out instructions.

Table 2: Average transaction fees

FEES	Credit unions ($)	Building societies ($)	Smaller banks ($)	Large banks ($)
Account-keeping fee	0.40	0.00	2.38	2.29
ATM withdrawal, own machine	1.43	0.80	0.75	0.59
ATM withdrawal, other bank's machine	1.43	1.19	0.63	0.95
EFTPOS transaction	1.79	1.95	1.09	0.33
Cheque withdrawal	1.93	1.94	0.81	0.69
OTC* cash withdrawal	1.71	1.00	1.14	2.02
Telephone transaction	0.30	0.00	0.49	0.29
Internet transaction	0.88	1.88	0.33	0.27
Average maximum number of free transactions per month	17	12	11	9

* OTC Over-the-counter

Source: Canvex data for financial institutions with more than 1% of responses in our survey.

GOODWILL HUNTING

ANDREW CAMPBELL

Jan of Fyshwick, ACT, didn't discover she was eligible for a fee exemption because of her physical disability until she visited her bank on crutches to complain about fees.

She says, "I can't recall having read any documentation stating this fee exemption and believe banks could do more to advise customers of this benefit."

Jan also points out that ATMs can be too high for people in wheelchairs, limiting the availability of banking services for them. "I believe the banks have a long way to go before they provide equitable service," she says.

significantly fewer large bank customers are very satisfied with these aspects of banking. The number of branches available and Internet banking services were the only exceptions to this.

What price fees?

Looking particularly at the fees charged by financial institutions in our survey, one reason becomes evident as to why large banks provoked one of the highest levels of dissatisfaction in the survey. **Table 2** shows that the average cost of an over-the-counter transaction with a large bank is about seven times the cost of using phone or Internet banking. And all the banks charge very high account-keeping fees compared with the credit unions and building societies.

Are we still loyal fans?

Despite the obvious dissatisfaction of many of our respondents, most customers remain loyal — or perhaps feel trapped by their bank. Only 22% have changed their institution in the last five years, and 52% have had their account for 11 years or more.

Perhaps that's not too surprising when you consider that over half our respondents think it's difficult to find the best banking product for them (see *Small can be beautiful*, page 16).

Another clue to the apparent loyalty despite the dissatisfaction is that of the 35% of respondents who don't pay bank fees, 60% of them are exempt because of a home loan or another account. This bundling of products can make switching banks difficult.

What's more, it's obvious from these results that changing banks won't necessarily improve things for you much, unless you have access to one of the three best institutions in our survey: NSW TEACHERS CREDIT UNION, BENDIGO BANK and BANK OF QUEENSLAND. Other credit unions may also offer good service but we didn't receive enough responses to report on them. So what can you do? See *Beating the banks*, right. ❑

Want to know more?

Our website, www.choice.com.au, has more tips on how to change your bank and get the best advice. See the articles *How to vote with your feet* and *How to get a better deal from your bank* in the 'Money' section of the site.

These articles also appeared in CHOICE in March 1998 (as part of *What's wrong with your bank?*) and March 1999 respectively. If you're a new subscriber and don't have these issues, call Consumer Services on (02) 9577 3399 and we'll send them to you free of charge.

Why are credit unions so popular?

Table 2, left, shows that the high number of free transactions and low account-keeping fees are likely to be part of what attracts customers to credit unions. The average number of fee-free transactions for those in our survey is much higher than for any other institution, and the account-keeping fees are much lower than the banks'.

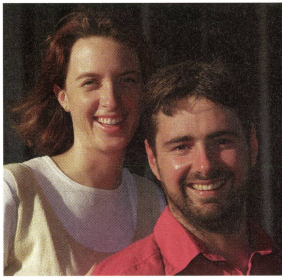
However, if you make more than the allowed number of fee-free transactions, look out. Our figures show it's more expensive to use ATMs, EFTPOS, cheques and the Internet with a credit union than with a bank.

It's also worth considering the advice of this reader: "Members of credit unions need to know they are shareholders and should exercise some of their rights and look into annual reports."

SAVING PRIVATE BANK FEES

The Sutherlands of Beachlands, WA, use a strategy mentioned by a lot of our readers: "The number of transactions we have with our bank account has been drastically reduced, as we now use our credit card for everything we can and just pay it off once a month. This is for convenience, frequent flyer points, lower fees and without a cheque account we avoid debit tax."

This idea can work well as long as you pay off the outstanding balance. You don't want to be paying interest instead of fees!



NICK BORGESE

Beating the banks

The good news is that there are ways to beat the system. Understanding your needs and the way you bank is a big step towards a more satisfying banking experience.

1. Why are you there?

There are different reasons for banking with a particular institution or type. Many people use banks as opposed to credit unions and building societies simply because they "always have" or they have a home loan.

Credit union and building society customers are more likely to use them because of low charges and good service, and because of their good reputation.

If you don't have a really good reason to stay with your current institution and could conveniently use another that does better in this survey, consider changing.

2. Try electronic banking

High fees create a fairly clear imperative to use electronic banking, which is currently still cheaper. Despite this, 88% of respondents still use their bank branch and 74% are still using cheque accounts.

Phone banking has become popular, though, with 53% of respondents using it, up from 38% in the last survey. The cheapest form of banking (see Table 2, far left) is still Internet banking, yet only 12% of respondents use it, and 32% never use EFTPOS, which is especially cheap with the big four banks.

Of course, using electronic banking doesn't suit everyone. This self-acclaimed member of the 'Grey Power Community' explains it well: "We're not afraid or too set in our ways to use ATMs or EFTPOS or telephone banking. We'll use them if we find them convenient. At the moment it suits us well to use cash."

3. Stay within your limits

Of our respondents, 41% use ATM machines three to seven times a month and EFTPOS more than four times. If you stay within the fee-free limits for these and other transactions, you can avoid paying out quite a lot of unnecessary money to the banks. Work out your usage pattern and whether you could change it to avoid all fees.

Table 2 shows the average number of fee-free transactions: from nine a month (the big four banks) to 17 (credit unions).

4. Find out about fee exemptions

It's certainly worth checking whether you're entitled to a fee exemption — 15% of our respondents didn't know.

Common reasons for fee exemptions in this survey include having another account or loan with the same bank (60%); being a pensioner (17%); and keeping an account above a certain dollar limit (9%).

You may also qualify for a fee exemption if you're a shareholder in the institution, a student, over 55 even if you're not a pensioner, or you have a physical disability.

If you think you qualify for any of these reasons, shop around and make sure you ask which fees you'll be exempt from. You may still have to pay for some transactions.

Bill and Maureen would like their sex life back ...

Pills can help, but who pays?

IN BRIEF

- It's worth talking to a doctor if you think any of the new drugs such as Viagra and Propecia can help you: you'll need a prescription and they'll check your medical history for potential problems.
- The drugs do work for many people — follow your doctor's advice and keep your expectations in check, and you could be very pleased with the results.
- Don't be tempted to bypass a doctor's visit and a prescription by buying over the Internet. It probably won't be cheaper and it could be dangerous to your health.

SO YOU THINK THE latest pills might cure your baldness? Help you lose weight? Get your sex life back? First of all, is it true? And even if it is, can you — or the health system — afford them? Most are expensive, and the line between treatment for a recognised illness and simply enhancing your lifestyle is becoming finer than ever.

Viagra is one of these new drugs that's become a household name — even before it hit the Australian market we'd heard all about it. The world's a small place and in the US the hype was astonishing. People started going to their doctors and asking for the little blue pill — people who'd never told their doctors previously that they'd had a problem with impotence. Suddenly here was a magic pill that could cure the problem — without the pain, mess, inconvenience and embarrassment of other, older methods.

Then reality hit. The Australian government's Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) decided not to subsidise it. Pfizer, the manufacturer, has since made a legal challenge to this decision (see *Could Viagra bring down the PBS?*, far right). At the moment you can get Viagra with a prescription from your doctor, but the government doesn't subsidise the cost. That makes it around $20 per erection — a high price for many of the people who really could benefit from it.

For people not affected by impotence, the answer may seem easy — if it's not a disease, user pays. But for those whose lives, relationships and sense of self-worth are rocked by their inability to have sex it's much more difficult. Erectile dysfunction is estimated to affect one million Australian men.

When we asked subscribers to write to us about their experiences with Viagra, a common theme emerged — it was much preferred to other treatments they'd tried, but why was it so expensive? As one person put it: "There is no trauma, as there is with the injections ... I can't afford to purchase it regularly, but I would by choice." And a wife wrote saying, "You have to ration it out, [so it's] a Saturday night special."

Other drugs for other complaints are less well-known, but pose similar conundrums: **Propecia** (finasteride) can help cure baldness in some people (see page 22), but is baldness an illness, and does it need curing? How serious does the embarrassment or depression it might cause have to be before the public purse should foot the bill? Other drugs currently in the pipeline include weight-loss drugs, and even a shyness pill.

The debate surrounding the issues raised by so-called lifestyle drugs is only just beginning in Australia and there are no easy answers. Here we look behind the hype at three drugs: who can benefit, what are the dangers and what do you need to consider before taking any.

Viagra

Cost: $60 to $70 for four 25 mg tablets; $70 to $80 for four 50 mg or 100 mg tablets.

Check with your health fund — if you have ancillary cover it may offer a rebate of around $50 on non PBS-subsidised drugs such as Viagra.

Who can it help?

Viagra treats erectile dysfunction (ED) — impotence, the persistent inability to achieve and maintain an erection suitable for sexual intercourse. The occasional inability to 'get it up' is not defined as ED.

Studies have found that Viagra improves erections in around 75% of men with ED — depending on the their age, the degree of their problem and its cause, as well as the strength of Viagra prescribed. However, this doesn't mean 75% of men will succeed in every attempt at intercourse on Viagra.

What doesn't it treat?

Viagra is not an aphrodisiac; it won't improve the sex drive or spice up the sex life of a man who can already achieve an erection. And as one subscriber put it: "If you're not interested [in sex] you might as well put it under your arm and leave it there."

However, it can improve erectile function in men with problems, and does seem to work with all types of ED. The highest success rates are for younger men with mild or moderate ED or those with spinal injuries. Men with diabetes have less success with the treatment. And while there have been some studies looking at whether Viagra can help women with sexual problems too, at this stage it's only prescribed for use by men.

How does it work?

Viagra enhances the release of nitric oxide, one link in a chain of events that relaxes the blood vessels in the penis. This increases the blood flow and results in an erection.

You take it between half and one hour before you expect to have sex, but it'll only result in an erection if you become sexually excited.

What are possible risks and side effects?

Viagra can cause some side effects, such as headache; facial and chest flushing; indigestion; nasal congestion; urinary tract infection; abnormal vision (a temporary colour tinge, increased light perception or blurred vision); diarrhoea; dizziness; and a rash. Headaches and flushing are the most common, but not everyone will experience side effects.

More concern is the interaction between Viagra and some other drugs that reduce blood pressure. Viagra can have a slight additive effect with drugs specifically used to treat high blood pressure. However, other drugs that aren't used to lower blood pressure but do so incidentally are also of concern. For this reason you mustn't take Viagra if you're also taking nitrate medicines for angina.

There've been reports of deaths of people taking Viagra, and taking nitrates at the same time may have been responsible for some of these. Some cases may also have been a result of extra strain on the heart caused by the excitement of starting sexual activity again, while others are still unexplained. Research is continuing, but a number of regulatory agencies around the world have looked at the incidents and as yet haven't seen the need for any further restrictions on Viagra's use in men who are medically fit for the exertions of intercourse.

(continued overleaf)

Viagra *does* make flowers stand up straight

It's not just an urban myth — researchers in Israel and Australia have found that small concentrations of Viagra in the water can double the time cut flowers last. Viagra-treated flowers can stand up straight for a week longer than usual. But it might be cheaper to buy new flowers.

Could Viagra bring down the PBS?

The Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) does for pharmaceuticals what Medicare does for hospital and medical care: by setting a price for pharmaceutical products and subsidising the majority of prescription medicines, the price you pay under the PBS is kept at an affordable rate.

Recent decisions by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Advisory Committee not to subsidise Viagra and Naltrexone (a treatment for heroin addiction) have upset many people, not least in the pharmaceutical industry.

The makers of both drugs have launched legal appeals against the decisions — Naltrexone's has been successful in getting the situation reviewed, while the Viagra case was in court as we went to press.

Media reports that these challenges were an attempt to undermine the PBS were quickly denied by the main industry body, the Australian Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association, which said the industry was "unequivocally committed to the maintenance of the PBS". However, a review of the PBS system may well be on the cards. CHOICE will be keeping a close eye on developments, with the aim of protecting the PBS and maintaining affordable pharmaceuticals for all Australians.

Recreational use of Viagra

Viagra found its way into the club scene in Britain within a few weeks of its release there. In one survey of Manchester clubbers, 3% had used Viagra, most in combination with other illegal or illicit drugs. Anecdotal evidence suggests it's used as a party drug here too, especially in combination with other drugs.

The particularly worrying aspect of this is the known interaction of Viagra with the well-known recreational drug amyl nitrate (which goes by a number of street names, such as amyl, poppers and rush), which could be fatal — it's the same problem as Viagra and nitrates used for heart conditions (see *Viagra*, page 21). Both drugs dilate the blood vessels, which can result in a dangerous drop in blood pressure and possibly heart attack or stroke.

How do you get it?

Viagra is only available on prescription. Some sites on the Internet offer to supply it and bypass the need for a doctor's visit to get a prescription by using online questionnaires — *Online pharmacy*, far right, gives more information on the legal issues involved and the investigations under way into such websites. In any case, there are very good reasons for always consulting a GP in person and being fully checked out:

- Using Viagra to treat ED without determining why you're suffering can be like using an asprin to treat a headache caused by a brain tumour — you could be covering up the symptoms of serious illnesses such as heart disease or diabetes that need treatment.
- If you've had ED for a while, your doctor needs to check your fitness to ensure your heart's up to the job, especially as nitrates can't be used to treat any heart problems that might arise during sex.
- Even though there's no good data from clinical studies yet, experts urge caution in using Viagra if you have some other diseases, and for men taking certain drugs for other conditions that may affect the rate Viagra is cleared from the body. A doctor is the best person to thoroughly check you out and help to solve your problems with ED.

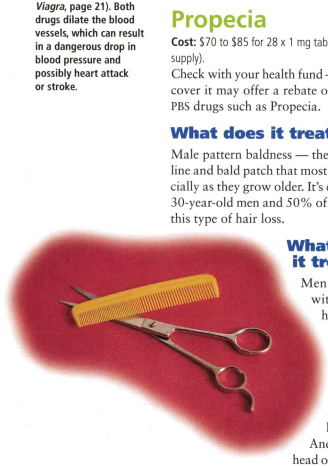
Propecia

Cost: $70 to $85 for 28 x 1 mg tablets (about a month's supply).

Check with your health fund — if you have ancillary cover it may offer a rebate of around $50 on non-PBS drugs such as Propecia.

What does it treat?

Male pattern baldness — the typical receding hairline and bald patch that most men experience, especially as they grow older. It's estimated that 30% of 30-year-old men and 50% of 50-year-old men have this type of hair loss.



What doesn't it treat?

Men (aged 18 and over) with mild to moderate hair loss can expect to see improvements — if you've been balding for many years and don't have much hair left, it's probably too late to lock the stable door. And if you expect a full head of hair to regrow, you'll probably need to rethink your expectations.

Propecia isn't suitable and isn't prescribed for women or children with hair loss.

How does it work?

Male pattern hair loss is thought to be caused by a combination of heredity and the action of a naturally occuring compound called dihydrotestosterone (DHT) on the hair follicles. DHT can send hair follicles into a kind of semi-retirement — eventually leaving nothing but barely visible fuzz.

DHT is produced from the male hormone testosterone, and Propecia reduces the amount of DHT in the body, helping to reverse the balding process.

What are possible risks and side effects?

Propecia can cause sexual side effects in a few men (2%) — decreased libido, erectile dysfunction or reduced amounts of semen. These effects disappeared when the men studied stopped taking Propecia.

Some researchers are concerned that there are no long-term studies on the use of Propecia. The studies used to assess its effectiveness only went for a few years, yet you must continue taking the drug to keep your improved hair. And if you're in your 30s or 40s that could mean a long time, so further long-term studies seem warranted.

There is, however, a group of men in the Dominican Republic who have an enzyme problem that makes them naturally low in DHT, and their lifespan is unaffected.

Women who are or could be pregnant shouldn't handle broken or crushed pills as the drug can be absorbed through the skin, and this could cause birth defects.

How do you get it?

Propecia is available on prescription from your doctor.

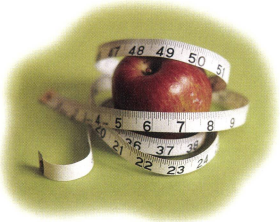
Xenical

Cost: Not yet available in Australia — the manufacturer, Roche, hopes it will be approved in the first half of 2000. Roche says the price is likely to be similar to other countries, such as the US and New Zealand — probably around $120 to $140 a month.

What does it treat?

Xenical (also known as Orlistat) can be used to treat obesity, even for people who haven't had success with weight-loss diets. It can also help these people to keep the lost weight off.

Studies have shown Xenical can cause obese people to lose more weight than just going on a diet: almost half the people studied lost 10% or more of their weight and 75% lost more than 5%.



What doesn't it treat?

All studies of Xenical have concentrated on very overweight or obese people — people with a body mass index (BMI) of more than 28 (see *Check your BMI*, below right, for more on this).

In the US, Xenical is only approved for people with a BMI of more than 30, or 27 if they've also got high blood pressure, high cholesterol or diabetes. In Britain you're required to lose at least 2.5 kg in a month based on a 'medical action plan' before your doctor can prescribe the drug. Australian authorities haven't made a decision yet, but one thing's for sure: it's not a magic bullet that will let you eat anything you like.

How does it work?

Xenical stops you absorbing as much as 30% of the fat you eat by making the enzymes in the intestines (which digest fat and normally allow you to absorb it) less effective.

What are possible risks and side effects?

Because you don't absorb all the fat you eat when taking Xenical, the most common side effects people have reported are gastro-intestinal problems — oily spotting, gas with discharge, faecal urgency, fatty stools, frequent bowel motions and flatulence.

You need to take Xenical when you're eating the fat in your diet, so you take a tablet with each meal and spread your fat intake throughout the day. A really fatty meal could result in some unpleasant side effects, and some commentators have suggested that the success of Xenical could in part be due to people reducing the fat in their diet to avoid these.

Xenical also affects the amount of fat-soluble vitamins and beta-carotene you absorb — so a vitamin supplement taken at least two hours before or after taking Xenical may be recommended.

How do you get it?

It's not yet available in Australia, but is available on prescription in the US, Britain and New Zealand. ❑

Online pharmacy

Australian law prohibits advertising prescription pharmaceuticals directly to consumers — including over the Internet. However, there's no such law in the US, where Internet pharmacies do a roaring trade in drugs like Viagra, Propecia and Xenical. The borderless nature of the Internet means Australian consumers can also experience shopping at an Internet pharmacy.

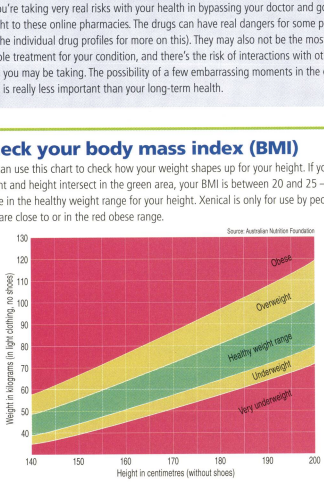
Why do people buy over the Net? The big surprise is that it's not the price — a single Viagra tablet will cost you about A$35 (A$28 plus postage) as opposed to less than $20 if you buy it from your local pharmacy. However, one site offers a hint: "No appointment, no waiting, no embarrassment, no waiting rooms, confidential — all from the comfort of your home or office."

Many US-based sites get around the usual prescription requirements by asking prospective customers to fill out a questionnaire. The customer pays only if the online physician agrees they should be prescribed the drug. However, the American Medical Association recently said that the practice of online doctors prescribing drugs by relying solely on online questionnaires falls well below a minimum standard of medical care — and that action should be taken against doctors who fail to meet this standard. Investigations into some of these sites are under way in the US, and at least one has been fined by one US state for allowing a pregnant woman to buy Propecia. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has even written to some websites outside the US warning they could be breaking the law if they sell without a prescription — and that future shipments would be detained. This type of activity would also be illegal in Australia.

You're taking very real risks with your health in bypassing your doctor and going straight to these online pharmacies. The drugs can have real dangers for some people (see the individual drug profiles for more on this). They may also not be the most suitable treatment for your condition, and there's the risk of interactions with other drugs you may be taking. The possibility of a few embarrassing moments in the doctor's office is really less important than your long-term health.

Check your body mass index (BMI)

You can use this chart to check how your weight shapes up for your height. If your weight and height intersect in the green area, your BMI is between 20 and 25 — you're in the healthy weight range for your height. Xenical is only for use by people who are close to or in the red obese range.



BMI applies to most adults over 18; it doesn't apply to anyone who is very muscular — for example, if you do muscle-building exercise.

Beat the breakdown blues

You don't realise how reliant you are on your home appliances until they don't deliver the goods. How can you protect yourself?

IN BRIEF

- You can save yourself a lot of money and hassle by choosing a brand with a good reliability record.
- Even if a brand is no longer on the market, you can use the reliability information if you're buying secondhand.

YOU'RE ON YOUR WAY HOME ON A warm Friday night, at the end of a long, hard week. You're looking forward to a soothing bath and friends arriving for the weekend. You've got everything ready for tonight's seafood barbie, a birthday surprise for your partner, so now you can relax.

But the big pool of water in front of the fridge and the less-than-fresh smell when you open it spell disaster: yes, your fridge has chosen the worst possible moment to go on the blink.

You'll never have the luxury of being 100% confident your washing machine or TV won't break down. But choosing a reliable brand could save you time, hassle and expensive repairs in the long run. To help you decide which brands to trust, we regularly ask subscribers to tell us about your experiences with various appliances. A record number of you — over 42,000 — responded this year, telling us about your experiences with:

- Washing machines (page 26).
- Fridges (page 27).
- TVs (page 26).
- VCRs (see right).
- Lawnmowers (see right).

Each year we look at a different group of appliances — if the one you're interested in isn't covered here, see our last article in CHOICE, April 1999.

Our survey

We sent the questionnaire to all CHOICE subscribers and received more than 42,000 replies. We asked the following questions about each appliance:

- When you purchased it.
- Its brand and type (eg. front- or top-loading washing machine).
- The nature of any problems.
- Whether you'd had it repaired in the past 12 months.
- Whether you'd buy the same brand again and, if not, why.

Percentage not needing repair

When we calculated the repair figures for each appliance, we ignored models that were more than eight years old. Other factors — such as usage — are likely to play a large part in the reliability of those machines. Also, you're less likely to find the same models available to buy new now, so the information isn't much help.

Of course, our subscribers own appliances of varying ages: for example, many **ADMIRAL** owners had older washing machines, while **WHIRLPOOL** owners had newer ones. So that this doesn't unfairly penalise or advantage any particular brand (older models being generally more likely to break down than new ones), we've statistically age-adjusted the figures for each brand.

Where it says, "Differences [between brands] of more than x% are meaningful", this means there were enough responses for us to be confident differences over 'x%' weren't caused by chance.

Problems reported

For each appliance, we've listed particular problems subscribers reported for a particular brand significantly more often than the average for all brands. For example, only 7% of all washing machine owners reported out-of-balance problems with the brand they'd bought, but 13% of **HOOVER** and **SIMPSON** owners reported this problem. We've only given this kind of information about appliances up to three years old, and we've included all respondents who reported the problem, not just those who'd had their appliance repaired.

CHOICE would like to thank everyone who took the time to return the survey.

VCRs

Video recorders have become almost as common as TVs — 95% of survey respondents own one. But unlike TVs (see page 26), their reliability didn't vary hugely from brand to brand. Overall 17% needed repair, making them one of the less reliable appliances.

More recent **LG/GOLDSTAR, SANYO, NEC** and **TEAC** VCRs did better than older models, so it seems these brands are becoming more reliable. In the case of **LG/GOLDSTAR**, this could be a result of the 1997 merger and brand change from **GOLDSTAR** to **LG**; the company says it's introduced a better quality-control program.

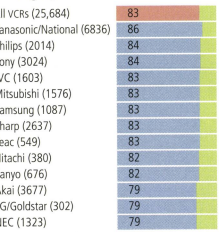
It seems there's more to brand loyalty than a good reliability record: although **SHARP** and **SAMSUNG** shared a common repair rate of 17%, **SHARP** owners were more likely to buy the brand again. Reasons for not buying a brand of VCR varied. Of those owners who wouldn't buy again, for **TEAC** 66% cited performance; for **AKAI** 40% cited frequent breakdowns. While only 6% of **SONY** owners said they wouldn't buy the brand again, 35% of those said it was because of the cost of repairs.

For VCRs up to three years old, subscribers reported the following problems significantly more often than average for these brands:

- Dirty heads: **AKAI** (20%).
- Tape mechanism: **AKAI** (20%).
- Picture: **AKAI** (7%), **MITSUBISHI** (7%), **SAMSUNG** (7%).

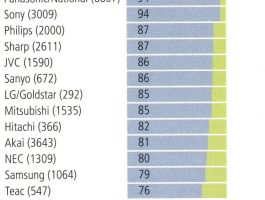
Percentage not needing repair

(Differences of more than 5% are meaningful)



The figure in brackets is the number of subscribers reporting on this brand.

Percentage who would buy the same brand again



The figure in brackets is the number of subscribers reporting on this brand.

Lawnmowers

Gardeners are still opting for the grunt of a petrol mower above the whisper of an electric model. The vast majority of the mowers reported on were four-stroke (59%) or two-stroke (36%) petrol models, while only 5% were electric.

However, electric models have the edge when it comes to reliability: less than 10% needed repair over the 12 months prior to the survey, compared with 18% for petrol models.

Two-stroke owners reported more problems with their starting mechanisms and fuel systems than four-stroke owners.

More **MTD** owners said their lawnmower had needed repair than for any other brand.

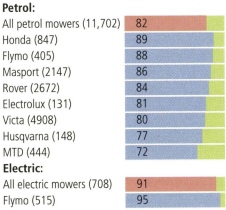
Of those **VICTA** owners who told us they wouldn't buy the same brand again, 45% said their machine was too hard to start.

For mowers up to three years old, subscribers reported the following problems significantly more often than average for these brands:

- Starting mechanism: **VICTA** (13%).
- Catcher: **MTD** (8%).

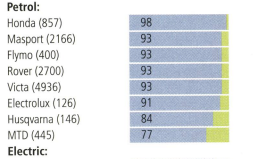
Percentage not needing repair

(Differences of more than 7% between petrol mower brands are meaningful. Flymo was the only electric brand we received enough responses to report on)



The figure in brackets is the number of subscribers reporting on this brand.

Percentage who would buy the same brand again



The figure in brackets is the number of subscribers reporting on this brand.

TVs

We asked subscribers to report on their main TV set, so it's not surprising that most responses (93%) were for 48 cm or larger models.

Overall, only 8% of TVs had been repaired, but between brands, reliability varied from good — a few brands with only 3% or 4% needing repair over the previous 12 months — to less impressive at the bottom of the table, with up to 20% needing repair. More recent **JVC** and **LG/GOLDSTAR** models did better than older ones, so it seems these brands are becoming more reliable. This was a repeat performance of the VCR results for **LG/GOLDSTAR**, again suggesting that the move to the **LG** brand in 1997 brought reliability improvements.

Brand loyalty again didn't correspond closely to repair record: **PALSONIC** and **LG/GOLDSTAR** shared a common repair rate of 13%, but **LG/GOLDSTAR** owners would be much more likely to buy the same brand again. Meanwhile, of the **SAMSUNG** owners who said they wouldn't buy the brand again, 34% cited frequent breakdowns.

For TVs up to three years old, subscribers reported the following problems significantly more often than average for these brands:

- Picture: **AWA** (23%), **AKAI** (12%), **MITSUBISHI** (12%), **TEAC** (11%).
- Sound: **AWA** (18%), **PHILIPS** (6%), **TEAC** (6%).
- Remote control: **AKAI** (10%), **TEAC** (7%).
- Tuner: **AWA** (9%), **AKAI** (4%).

Percentage not needing repair

(Differences of more than 6% are meaningful)

All TVs (21,981)	92
Panasonic/National (4334)	97
Sony (4546)	96
Sharp (1761)	94
Hitachi (285)	93
NEC (1795)	93
Sanyo (871)	93
JVC (418)	92
Mitsubishi (1029)	91
Philips (2034)	90
Samsung (1044)	88
LG/Goldstar (361)	87
Palsonic (506)	87
Akai (1345)	85
Toshiba (190)	85
AWA (260)	83
Blaupunkt (163)	83
Teac (1039)	80

The figure in brackets is the number of subscribers reporting on this brand.

Percentage who would buy the same brand again

Panasonic/National (4363)	98
Sony (4607)	98
JVC (422)	95
Sanyo (888)	94
Sharp (1762)	94
Mitsubishi (1007)	93
Hitachi (285)	92
LG/Goldstar (361)	92
NEC (1810)	91
Philips (2039)	90
Toshiba (181)	87
Samsung (1045)	85
Akai (1341)	84
Blaupunkt (160)	84
AWA (251)	77
Palsonic (507)	77
Teac (1042)	75

The figure in brackets is the number of subscribers reporting on this brand.

Washing machines

Front-loading machines, despite their advantages in water and energy savings, are still less popular, though they seem to be gaining ground. This year just over one in five subscribers had a front loader, a sizable increase since our last survey.

They seem to be slightly less reliable than their top-loading cousins, though a notable exception is **MIELE** — it specialises in front loaders and is a very reliable brand. Overall, 16% of washing machines needed repair, making them one of the less reliable appliances.

At the bottom of the table are **BENDIX** and **THOR** — almost a third of these brands' owners reported their machines had needed repair, more than for any other appliance in this survey.

When it came to brand loyalty, of those **HOOVER** owners who told us they wouldn't buy the same brand again, 46% said their concern was poor performance. **FISHER & PAYKEL** was pretty average in terms of reliability, but close to the top of the loyalty table. Of the 6% who wouldn't buy again, 33% cited the expense of repairs, while 41% said their machine broke down too often.

For machines up to three years old, subscribers reported the following problems significantly more often than average for these brands:

Percentage not needing repair

(Differences of more than 7% are meaningful)

All machines (21,148)	84
Miele (396)	93
Maytag (332)	92
Kleenmaid (1317)	90
Hitachi (836)	88
Whirlpool (1341)	86
Westinghouse (366)	85
Asko Asea (698)	84
Simpson (3437)	84
Fisher & Paykel (6564)	83
Samsung (101)	82
Admiral (277)	81
Hoover (4341)	81
GE (371)	77
Bendix (610)	71
Thor (161)	71

The figure in brackets is the number of subscribers reporting on this brand.

- Controls and switch: GE (9%), BENDIX (7%).
- Out of balance: HOOVER (13%), SIMPSON (13%).
- Burnt-out motor: GE (7%).
- Circuitry: FISHER & PAYKEL (5%).

However, subscribers reported most other problems significantly *less* often for F&P machines.

- Program selector: SIMPSON (4%).
- Pump: HITACHI (3%).
- Burst or leaking hoses: HOOVER (3%), WHIRLPOOL (4%).
- Gearbox: GE (6%).

Percentage who would buy the same brand again

Miele (402)	98
Fisher & Paykel (6626)	94
Asko Asea (706)	93
Maytag (337)	93
Hitachi (833)	92
Kleenmaid (1322)	91
Samsung (96)	88
Westinghouse (362)	88
Whirlpool (1357)	86
Hoover (4318)	85
Simpson (3436)	84
GE (362)	81
Bendix (609)	80
Admiral (259)	73
Thor (157)	72

The figure in brackets is the number of subscribers reporting on this brand.

Fridges

As with TVs, we asked our subscribers about their main fridge, so it's not surprising that most reported on a medium to large model (400 L upwards). Significantly, though, more of those who told us about these larger fridges said they'd had them repaired over the past 12 months. So it seems smaller fridges are slightly more reliable.

There wasn't much difference between brands, and fridges are a fairly reliable appliance — only 10% overall had needed repair.

Again, brand loyalty didn't follow reliability. The brand the most subscribers were likely to buy again, FISHER & PAYKEL, shared a repair rate with HOOVER, which came close to the bottom for brand loyalty. So why weren't 19% of HOOVER owners intending to purchase again? The most common reason, cited by 62% of them, was noise.

For fridges up to three years old, subscribers reported the following problems significantly more often than average for these brands:

- Noise: HOOVER (14%), KELVINATOR (11%).
- Door seal: FISHER & PAYKEL (6%).
- Shelves: SAMSUNG (10%), FISHER & PAYKEL (3%).
- Control/thermostat: KELVINATOR (5%).
- Temperature: KELVINATOR (7%).
- Leaking gas/compressor: WESTINGHOUSE (3%).

Percentage not needing repair

(Differences of more than 7% are meaningful)

All fridges (18,599)	90
Sharp (677)	95
Samsung (174)	92
Whirlpool (669)	92
Fisher & Paykel (5136)	90
Hoover (2032)	90
Kelvinator (2738)	90
Westinghouse (5880)	90
GE (666)	87
Amana/Kleenmaid (323)	85
Frigidaire (264)	85

The figure in brackets is the number of subscribers reporting on this brand.

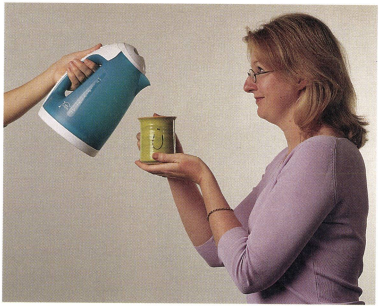
Percentage who would buy the same brand again

Fisher & Paykel (5190)	93
Westinghouse (5907)	90
Whirlpool (670)	90
GE (672)	88
Amana/Kleenmaid (323)	87
Kelvinator (2741)	86
Sharp (674)	86
Hoover (1839)	81
Samsung (171)	80
Frigidaire (257)	77

The figure in brackets is the number of subscribers reporting on this brand.

On the boil

Want a cuppa in a hurry? No problem — all cordless kettles boil water fast. The real differences are what they look like, how easy they are to use and their price.



IN BRIEF

- All the kettles tested are reasonably energy-efficient, in that they don't lose much heat, and only three take noticeably longer than three minutes to boil a litre of water. The biggest difference is in ease of use.
- Good stability on the base, somewhere to store the cord and safety features such as a lockable lid and exterior heat protection are wise options to consider.
- A D-shaped handle and water level indicators on both sides for left and right-handed users are also useful features.

A KETTLE SITS ON YOUR KITCHEN bench all the time, so what it looks like is important. Current fashions are vibrant colours or trendy pastels, snazzy new shapes like 'dolphins', ultra-streamlined and stainless steel designs. And because you use it every day, you want it to be easy to use, with no irritating foibles.

Convenient cordless kettles are the most popular way to boil water, with an estimated 75% share of the market. Upright cordless jugs (mostly plastic) sell more than cordless dome-shaped kettles (generally stainless steel), but this test of sixteen 1.5–2.0 litre cordless kettles priced between $50 and $120 includes both.

Scoreboard

Easiest to use were the TEFAL Vitesse, KRUPS AquaControl 859 and PHILIPS HD 4627 Filterline (see the kettle profiles, right, for details).

All the models passed the safety tests. But it's worth noting that the exterior (not the handle or base) of a stainless steel kettle gets quite hot after boiling. The BREVILLE SK25 Smart Kettle, PHILIPS HD 4601 Filterline, RONSON 2HD-8553, RUSSELL HOBBS 3120 Carousel, SUNBEAM KE8800 and TEFAL 78498 Eclipse all did — and they're all stainless steel.

Only the KENWOOD JK723, MOULINEX Aqualia A21 and RONSON 2HD-8553 spilt their entire contents when tipped over — dangerous with boiling water.

WHAT TO BUY

KRUPS AquaControl 859	$89
TEFAL Vitesse	$80
PHILIPS HD 4627 Filterline	$69
SUNBEAM KE3560 Quantum	$65
SUNBEAM KE3860 Quantum Plus	$75

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- **Left/right-handed use:** The handle should be symmetrical. Ideally the **water-level indicators** should be on both sides and clearly visible (only the plastic kettles in this test are like this). Brightly coloured floats in the indicators help you see exactly where the level is. The water indicator is inside all the stainless steel kettles in this test; the **BREVILLE SK25 Smart Kettle** also has one outside.
- **Switches:** Should be easy to use and locate without having to look for them. They should be clearly labelled and indicate when they've been activated.
- **Filling:** Either the spout should be large enough to fill the kettle easily, or the lid should be easy to open. The water level indicator should be easy to see.
- **Pouring:** The water should pour smoothly no matter how much is in the kettle. The opening should be narrow enough to aim steam away from your hand.
- Provision for cord storage keeps loose cord out of the way, reducing the risk of pulling the kettle over.
- **Cleaning:** The kettle should have a smooth surface with few crevices to avoid accumulation of dirt.
- A **lightweight** jug is probably easiest to use, especially when full.
- A **hinged** or **removable lid** for easy cleaning and filling. Lockable lids are safer.
- **Anti-scale filters** catch scale and loose particles when pouring water. (They don't filter the water.)
- **Boil indicator** — a light that comes on when the kettle is activated and turns off when the water is boiled, and/or an audible click.

A spout cover prevents foreign matter and insects from getting into the kettle.

Models in the *What to buy* list are profiled in rank order from left to right. Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in December 1999. Anything lower is a bargain.

KRUPS AquaControl 859

Target price: $89

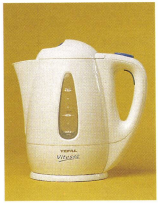
Good points

- Equal best overall.
- Equal second-best for ease of use.
- Dual water windows for right- or left-handed use.
- Pours easily.
- Power-on light is easy to see and there's clear labelling on the switch.
- Auto boil off, and boil-dry protection.
- Lightweight.
- Did well in the spill test, with minimal water loss.
- Has a spout cover, which helps prevent things like insects falling into the kettle.
- Anti-scale filter (see *What to look for*, below left).

Bad points

- Spout cover requires effort to hold open when pouring or filling, which can strain your wrist.
- No warranty or service information provided.

TEFAL Vitesse



Target price: $80

Good points

- Equal best overall.
- Easiest to use.
- Easy to fill through spout.
- Dual water windows for right- or left-handed use.
- Auto boil off, and boil-dry protection.
- Pours easily.
- Easy to clean.
- Anti-scale filter.
- Instructions are easy to read and useful.

Bad points

- The handle is slightly uncomfortable.
- The exterior has too many crevices where dirt can accumulate.
- No power-on light.
- Vibrates when boiling.

PHILIPS HD 4627 Filterline

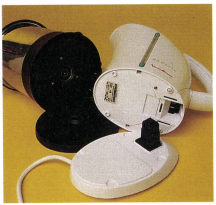
Target price: $69

Good points

- Second-best overall.
- Equal second-best for ease of use.
- Easy to fill through spout.
- Dual water windows for right- or left-handed use.
- Pours easily.
- Power-on light is easy to see.
- Auto boil off, and boil-dry protection.
- Anti-scale filter.
- Instructions are easy to read and useful.

Bad Point

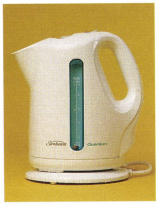
- Its upright handle is slightly uncomfortable and strains your wrist.



ABOVE: The base can be either fixed, where the kettle sits in the same 'locked' position on the base (above right), or 'free', with a 360° axis that allows repositioning at any angle (above left). There are pros and cons of both designs. Either way, the kettle should fit securely and easily onto the base, which should remain stable and not wobble around.

ABOVE LEFT: If the kettle has a fixed base it's handy if there are multiple exit points for the cord, so you can position the base wherever you want.

SUNBEAM KE3560 QUANTUM



Target price: $65

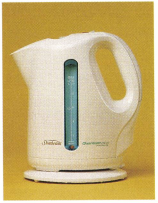
Good points

- Equal fastest to boil 1 L of water.
- Easy to fill through the spout.
- Dual water windows for right- or left-handed use.
- Pours easily.
- Auto boil off, and boil-dry protection.
- Easy to clean.
- Instructions are easy to read and useful.
- The best kettle for people with a disability.

Bad points

- Some splashing from the spout when boiling.

SUNBEAM KE3860 QUANTUM Plus



Target price: $75

Good points

- Easy to fill through the spout.
- Dual water windows for right- or left-handed use.
- Auto boil off and boil-dry protection.
- Pours easily.
- Easy to clean.
- Spout cover.
- Anti-scale filter.
- Instructions are easy to read and useful.

Bad points

- Spout cover is slightly awkward to hold open when pouring or filling.
- The exterior has too many crevices where dirt can accumulate.

Brand/model (in rank order)	Manufacturer / distributor	Origin	Target price ($)*	Warranty (years)	Type	Material	Capacity (L)	Weight (kg)**	1 Element	2 Base
KRUPS 859 AquaControl **(A)**	Shriro	France	89	1	Jug	Plastic	1.7	0.67	Exposed	Fixed
TEFAL Vitesse	Groupe SEB	France	80	1	Jug	Plastic	1.7	0.79	Concealed	Free
PHILIPS HD 4627 Filterline	Philips	UK	69	1	Jug	Plastic	1.7	0.77	Exposed	Fixed
SUNBEAM KE3560 Quantum	Sunbeam	NZ	65	1	Jug	Plastic	1.7	0.78	Exposed	Free
SUNBEAM KE3860 Quantum Plus	Sunbeam	NZ	75	1	Jug	Plastic	1.7	0.85	Exposed	Free
KENWOOD JK723 **(A)**	Hagemeyer	China	59	1	Jug	Plastic	1.7	0.44	Exposed	Fixed
SUNBEAM KE8800 Whistling	Sunbeam	China	119	1	Dome	Stainless steel	1.8	1.29	Concealed	Free
TEFAL Delfina Blue **(B)**	Groupe SEB	France	60	1	Jug	Plastic	1.5	0.64	Exposed	Fixed
MISTRAL JC50 Dolphin	Mistral	China	55	2	Jug	Plastic	1.5	0.74	Concealed	Free
MOULINEX A21 Aqualia	Shriro	France	60	1	Jug	Plastic	1.5	0.61	Exposed	Fixed
KENWOOD JK950 Vision	Hagemeyer	China	70	1	Jug	Plastic	1.7	0.75	Concealed	Free
RUSSELL HOBBS 3120 Carousel	Asko Appliances	UK	119	2	Dome	Stainless steel	1.7	1.10	Concealed	Free
TEFAL 78498 Eclipse	Groupe SEB	France	119	1	Dome	Stainless steel	2.0	1.05	Concealed	Free
BREVILLE SK25 Smart Kettle	Breville	China	60	1	Jug	Stainless steel	1.6	0.87	Concealed	Free
RONSON 2HD-8553	Thebe International	China	75	1	Jug	Stainless steel	1.7	0.80	Concealed	Free
PHILIPS HD 4601 Filterline	Philips	UK	110	1	Dome	Stainless steel	1.7	1.19	Concealed	Free

What about the rest?

Like the models in the *What to buy* list, all the kettles tested boiled water efficiently, but they have a few idiosyncracies worth noting.

ABOVE: The Moulinex A21 Aqualia's (5) lid came off in the spillage test, giving it a poor score; it also doesn't have a power-on light. The Kenwood JK950 Vision (6) vibrates as it boils. The Russell Hobbs 3120 Carousel (7) got the equal lowest ease of use score and has no power-on light. When you're pouring from the Tefal 78498 Eclipse (8) steam is directed over your hand.

ABOVE: Although the Kenwood JK723 (1) is the lightest kettle, it can can be unstable and its lid came off in the spillage test, giving it a poor score. The Sunbeam KE8800 Whistling (2) is heavy and its handle and design make it difficult to pour out the last cup of water. The Tefal Delfina Blue (3) has no power-on light. The Mistral JC50 Dolphin (4) vibrates when boiling.

LEFT: These three kettles scored the lowest in the test, largely because they took noticeably longer to boil. They're also near the bottom of the list for ease of use. It's uncomfortable to hold the Breville SK25 Smart Kettle's lid up when filling (9). The Ronson 2HD-8553 (10) got the equal lowest ease of use score, a bad result in the spillage test, some steam is directed onto your hand when pouring and it needs strong thumb pressure to keep the lid open when filling. The Philips HD 4601 Filterline (11) also got equal lowest ease of use score — its lid is in an awkward position and is hard to open and replace, filling through the spout is difficult as you have to tilt the kettle, and it's difficult to pour out the last cup of water.

3	4	5	6	6	7	8	9	
	Power-on light	Cord storage	Boiling 1 litre (min : sec)	Boiling score (%)	Efficiency score (%)	Ease of use score (%)	Overall score (%)	Brand / model (in rank order)
cking, button release, removable	✓	✓	2 min : 53 sec	78	85	82	81	**KRUPS** 859 AquaControl **(A)**
cking hinged lid		✓	2 min : 54 sec	77	81	83	81	**TEFAL** Vitesse
cking hinged lid	✓	✓	2 min : 55 sec	77	87	82	80	**PHILIPS** HD 4627 Filterline
cking hinged lid	✓	✓	2 min : 48 sec	81	80	77	79	**SUNBEAM** KE3560 Quantum
cking hinged lid	✓	✓	2 min : 53 sec	78	81	77	78	**SUNBEAM** KE3860 Quantum Plus
movable	✓		3 min : 04 sec	71	79	80	76	**KENWOOD** JK723 **(A)**
movable	✓	✓	2 min : 49 sec	81	80	72	76	**SUNBEAM** KE8800 Whistling
nged		✓	2 min : 59 sec	74	86	77	76	**TEFAL** Delfina Blue **(B)**
cking hinged lid	✓		2 min : 58 sec	75	86	70	74	**MISTRAL** JC50 Dolphin
movable		✓	3 min : 02 sec	72	85	73	74	**MOULINEX** A21 Aqualia
movable	✓		3 min : 02 sec	72	84	72	73	**KENWOOD** JK950 Vision
movable		✓	3 min : 01 sec	73	81	67	71	**RUSSELL HOBBS** 3120 Carousel
movable	✓	✓	3 min : 03 sec	71	81	68	71	**TEFAL** 78498 Eclipse
cking hinged lid	✓	✓	3 min : 27 sec	55	83	72	66	**BREVILLE** SK25 Smart Kettle
ring flip lid	✓	✓	3 min : 23 sec	58	83	67	65	**RONSON** 2HD-8553
movable	✓	✓	3 min : 21 sec	59	73	67	64	**PHILIPS** HD 4601 Filterline

* Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in December 1999.

** Excluding base.

(A) According to the manufacturer, this model has been discontinued. However, some may still be available in the shops.

(B) The blue model is being discontinued, but the kettle will be available in white, mango or yellow.

1 Element

A concealed element allows for easy cleaning. Exposed elements are easier to fix.

2 Base

See *What to look for*, page 28, for details about the different types of kettle base.

3 Lid

Lids can be hinged, lockable and/or removable. Lockable lids are a safer option when boiling and pouring as there's less danger of them unintentionally opening. None of these kettles is moulded all-in-one with no lid.

4 Power-on light

A light (often red) indicates that the kettle is switched on and boiling water.

5 Cord storage

See *What to look for* for details.

6 Boiling time and score

How fast each kettle boiled one litre of water.

7 Efficiency score

The kettles were rated for heat loss when boiling one litre of water: 100% efficiency would mean the kettle loses no heat at all.

8 Ease of use score

See *What to look for* for a list of what we assessed.

9 Overall score

The overall score is a combination of the following:.

- Performance: 40%
- Efficiency: 10%
- Ease of use: 50%

For people with a disability

An occupational therapist from the Independent Living Centre found most of the kettles to be OK, though some had better features. While the nature of your disability (vision, hand or wrist weakness) influences which kettle is best for you, features to look for include:

- Lightweight and easy to fit under the tap, so avoid the taller jug designs.
- A roomy D-shaped handle.
- A large, well-directed spout.
- Clear water level indicators on both sides.
- A base with an edge that acts as a guide for easy replacement.
- Light touch controls or large switches, a lid and filter that are easy to remove and replace, as well as cord storage, also make life easier.

The **SUNBEAM KE3560 Quantum** has most of these features. It's also easy to clean, with very few crevices, has large visible orange floats in the water windows and a spout cover that conveniently opens when the handle is gripped.

Stainless steel dome kettles aren't recommended because they're considerably heavier, their exterior becomes quite hot after boiling and their handle shape makes pouring difficult. Their lids, which need to be removed for filling, tend to fit awkwardly under the handle, and it's difficult to see the water indicators as they're on the inside.

Water should pour smoothly no matter how much is in the kettle. Steam should be aimed away from your hand.

Choosing a cooktop

Thinking of buying a new cooktop? Here's what's out there, how the different types compare and what to look for when you're choosing one.

IN THIS ARTICLE

- The pros and cons of gas vs electricity and of the different kinds of electric element.
- Induction cooktops: the coolest way of cooking — see *Magnetic attraction*, page 35, for more.

THE OLD KITCHEN RANGE IS ALMOST a thing of the past. Having separate units allows you the flexibility to put the oven and cooktop where you like, and at the height that suits you best. You can also mix and match your fuels — a gas cooktop with an electric oven is a popular combination.

Apart from these practical considerations, there's also style: a cooktop integrated with the bench gives your kitchen a modern streamlined look. It also allows a better use of space, particularly in a small or narrow kitchen — for example, if you have a narrow bench you might prefer a rectangular cooktop instead of the more common square design.

The downside is that a separate cooktop and oven can be more expensive than a combined unit. The typical prices given below are for mid-range models — exclusive brands or customised designs can cost much more.

Your cooktop options

Your first decision is whether to go gas or electric.

Gas

Most cooks prefer gas for cooktops because it gives instant heat control and visual feedback when you raise and lower the flame. It's also cheaper and more environmentally friendly than cooking with electricity (see *Want to think green?*, page 34). If mains gas isn't available where you live, you can use bottled gas with many gas cooktops — just check when you're buying.

There's a wide variety, so you should be able to find a design tailored to your needs. For example, if you use a wok, you can get a cooktop with one high-speed burner and a trivet especially designed to hold a round-bottomed wok. Another popular option is a rectangular five-burner unit with four regular burners and an oblong (or fish) burner in the middle. You can also put a grill over it for barbecuing or, if you're not using it, cover it up and use it as a pot stand.

Cookware: All types OK.

Typical prices: Four-burner — $350–$600+; four-burner + one oblong burner — $650–$1000+.

Electric

Electric cooktops are less instantly controllable than gas, but are useful for cooking at very low temperatures, like melting chocolate, or for a long, slow simmer.

For elements the options are ceramic radiant, halogen, radiant coil, solid hotplate and induction; only induction gives you the same instant heat control as gas. Briefly, their pros and cons are:

- **Ceramic radiant:** These are coiled metal elements under tempered ceramic glass (see the photo, right, and our latest test, page 36). They're fast, energy-efficient and have a continuous surface, with few or no dirt traps. However, spills can bake on, so you need to wipe them up quickly, and there's often no lip around the edge of the cooktop to contain them. Sugary spills will pit the surface if they're not cleaned up immediately, and you may need a special cleaning cream to keep the surface streak-free.

The glass holds the heat for a long time, so take care with delicate sauces and with safety after switching off; many have residual-heat warning lights that stay on till the element reaches a safe temperature.

Cookwar e: It's important to choose pans with a flat base as you need good contact with the surface for efficient heating. Make sure the base is free of grit or burrs that could scratch the cooktop. Aluminium and copper-based pans may leave deposits on the surface. You can use cooktop-safe glass pans, but cooking may be slower.

Typical price: $600–1200+.

■ **Halogen or semi-halogen:** Some ceramic cooktops have elements that use halogen bulbs to create heat. Semi-halogen burners combine a halogen bulb with a coiled metal element. Their performance, ease of cleaning and energy efficiency are similar to ceramic radiant cooktops, but they're more expensive. Try not to look directly at the element when it's on, as it could harm your eyes.

Cookware: The same as for ceramic radiant, except that glass saucepans aren't recommended by some manufacturers.

Typical price: The upper end of the ceramic radiant price range.

■ **Radiant coil:** Coiled metal elements are cheap, have similar heat-up times to ceramic radiant cooktops and are slightly more controllable. The coils can trap dirt, making them a hassle to clean; some have a hinge so you can lift them for easier access to the drip trays underneath. They're the most energy-efficient of the common electric types; only induction cooktops and gas are better.

Cookware: All types OK.

Typical price: $300–$600+.

■ **Solid hotplate:** A solid metal disc — most are as fast as other electric elements to heat up, but all are extremely slow to cool down, making them the least controllable of all cooktops. They can be cast or sintered, and the different manufacturing processes involved make a difference to their energy efficiency: cast hotplates are the least efficient of all, while sintered ones are about the same as ceramic radiant.

They're not too bad for cleaning because spills can't get under their surface, though there can be a dirt trap where the hotplate joins the surrounding surface on some models. Even on their highest setting they don't glow red, so there can be a risk of burns.

Cookware: All types OK. A very flat base that makes good contact with the element improves heating efficiency.

Typical price: $300–$600+.

■ **Induction:** These 'elements' use a magnetic field to heat up the pan, which then heats the contents, while the cooktop itself stays relatively cool. It's the fastest cooking method and just as controllable as gas — but it's very expensive at the moment and you can only use certain types of cookware. See *Magnetic attraction*, page 35, for more on induction cooking.

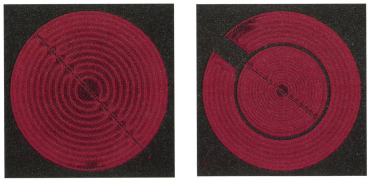
Typical price: $1800–$3000+.

Mix and match

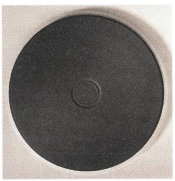
If you can't decide between gas and electricity, you can have the best of both worlds with a dual-fuel cooktop (such as a gas cooktop with an electric element) or by pairing cooktops — putting a gas twin cooktop with a ceramic radiant twin cooktop, for example. These will be more expensive than one four-burner hob.

You can also get barbecues, grill plates and deep fryers integrated into the cooktop, so if you do a lot of these types of cooking, they could be worth considering.

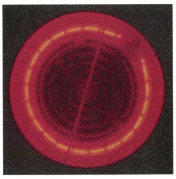
PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHEF



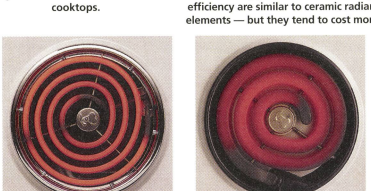
Ceramic radiant cooktops: fast, energy-efficient and streamlined. You'll find various names, such as 'ceramspeed', 'ribbon' (left) or 'Series 6', but they're all the same kind of element. Some have a dual element (right), which means you can use a small pan on the centre element only, without wasting energy.



Solid hotplates: fast enough to heat up, but very slow to cool down, so they're the least controllable of all cooktops.



Some ceramic cooktops have one or two halogen elements. While they look striking, their cooking performance and energy efficiency are similar to ceramic radiant elements — but they tend to cost more.



Radiant coil elements: mono or duotube (right) variations are thicker, flatter and closer together than normal (thin) radiant coils (left), and provide better heat transfer and faster heating response.

CHOOSING A COOKTOP: WHAT TO LOOK FOR

■ **Size and shape:** The most popular is a square-shaped cooktop, approximately 60 cm wide. You can also get rectangular units with the burners/elements in various configurations.

■ Make sure you have the necessary **space** on your bench to fit the cooktop, as well as ventilation space underneath (measure the available space before you go shopping). Appliance stores should have brochures with the specifications for the models you're interested in.

■ **Multi-combination units** allow you to put your own choice of burners/elements (gas, ceramic, induction) and other units (such as a deep-fat fryer or grill) together — see *Mix and match*, page 33.

■ Consider the position and layout of **burners/elements** and their size in relation to the pots and pans you usually use.

■ **Controls:** Look for control knobs that are a good size, ideally with a crossbar so they're easy to grip, and a clear pointer. The symbols and markings should be easy to read and understand, and the controls' layout should match the burner/element layout as intuitively as possible. If they're close to the front of the cooktop they'll be easy to reach ... but for children too, so think carefully about what you want.

■ An **easy to clean** surface and a design without dirt traps. A good cooktop should be able to effectively contain reasonable spills, which could be a problem with some ceramic cooktops that don't have a lip or rim to do this. As a rule, enamel cooktops are easier to clean and keep clean than ceramic or stainless steel. Knobs should be easy to remove for cleaning underneath.

Gas cooktops: instant heat control with visual feedback. They're also cheap to run and comparatively green, and some have a special high-speed burner with a trivet designed to hold a round-bottomed wok.

With gas cooktops, depressions on the hob surface help contain spills (above), while the burner and collar can be removed for easy cleaning. A flame-failure safety feature (right) stops gas escaping if the flame goes out.

... in gas cooktops

■ **Burners:** Gas burners are rated in megajoules per hour, which represents the amount of energy they use on their maximum setting. Four-burner cooktops should have a good range of heat ratings, from slow (around 3.5 to 5 MJ/h) to fast (up to 10 or 11 MJ/h). Burner sizes vary from around 4 cm to 7 cm in diameter.

■ **Safety:** Knobs that have to be pushed down before they can be turned on means you won't accidentally knock them on while cleaning, and makes it harder for children to operate them.

If the flame goes out while the gas is turned on, gas can escape into the room. Some cooktops have a flame-failure feature for this reason — the gas either automatically cuts out or automatically re-ignites.

■ The **pan supports** should be flat and stable on the burner.

■ Burners that fit snugly into a single cooktop surface with a lip around it are generally **easier to clean** than those with individual spill trays.

For people with a disability

When you're choosing a cooktop for someone with a disability, consider the following features (in addition to those in *What to look for*, above), which can make a cooktop easier or harder to use.

■ Knobs with a crossbar are easier to grip and turn than smooth, round knobs. Make sure they don't require too much force to turn them.

■ Symbols and markings should be easy to understand: words (off, simmer, high, etc) may be easier to understand than symbols. They should also be bold, easy to read and in a colour that contrasts well with the background (preferably black on white).

■ A ceramic radiant cooktop may be ideal for someone lacking strength in their wrists, because its flat surface means you can easily slide the saucepans on and off the element — although manufacturers recommend you don't do this because you may scratch the surface.

■ If you're buying a gas cooktop, look for one with an ignition pushbutton, rather than a knob you have to press and twist. A cooktop with automatic gas cutout or re-ignition is also worth considering (see *What to look for*).

Want to think green?

As a rule, electric cooktops are more energy-efficient than gas: something like 60–70% of the energy consumed is used to heat the saucepan (and its contents), compared with around 40% for gas. This is because a lot of the heat from gas is lost to the air, whereas electric elements are in direct contact with the saucepan (which is why it's important to use a saucepan of the correct size).

However, unless your electricity is generated by non-polluting, renewable energy (such as Tasmania's hydro power), you'll contribute more carbon dioxide — a greenhouse gas — to the atmosphere using electricity rather than gas. This is because up to two thirds of the energy contained in coal is lost — through its conversion to electricity at the power plant, then in transport to your home and conversion to heat. While there are some transport losses with natural gas, virtually all of its energy is available for use when it gets to your home.

■ **Ignition systems** include mains and battery-powered electronic ignition, piezo and manual (matches or a burner lighter). If you get one with electronic ignition, make sure you can also light it with a match in the event of a power cut.

■ The **pan supports** and any trivets (smaller pot stands, such as for a wok or coffee pot) should be easy to remove and washable in the kitchen sink.

... in electric cooktops

■ Electric elements are rated in kW: look for a good range — say 1.2–2.2 kW.

■ Many electric cooktops remain hot long after the heat has been turned off, which is a potential safety hazard. They should have a **residual-heat warning light**, which stays on until the cooktop has cooled down to a safe temperature.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MIELLE

Some ceramic radiant cooktops and all induction cooktops have touch-sensitive controls rather than knobs, so the surface is completely flush, with no joins to interfere with cleaning.

Installation

When you're installing a new cooktop, get a licensed tradesperson to do it.

■ **It's safer — they know what they're doing, and you don't want to risk an electric shock.**

■ **Even if you're a talented handyperson and think you can do it yourself, if something goes wrong the warranty may be rendered void.**

Magnetic attraction

Induction cookers are no longer solely the realm of TV science shows: they're out in the shops at prices some keen cooks might contemplate.

Cool cooking

Traditional electric cooktops use some form of electric resistance to create heat, and this heat transfers to the saucepan and its contents. Induction cooking is based on magnetic fields: an induction coil converts electricity into a magnetic field that generates heat directly in the base of the cooking utensil. It's the heat in the utensil that cooks the food; meanwhile the cooktop surface itself remains relatively cool, as the photo on the right dramatically illustrates. If you turn the cooktop on and put your hand on the element, you won't be burnt because your hand isn't magnetic (see *But it comes at a price*, right, for compatible cooking materials).

These cooktops have the same instant control as gas and are the fastest of all cooktop types — for example, they take about half the time of conventional electric cooktops to boil water.

Cleaning

They're easy to clean because they have a continuous surface with no dirt traps, and the controls are touch-sensitive, so there aren't even any knobs to clean around. Because the surface doesn't get very hot during cooking, spills don't bake on. On the downside, there may not be a lip around the edge to contain spills, and you may have to buy a special cream to keep the cooktop streak-free.

Energy

Induction models are much more energy-efficient than other electric cooktops (around 90% compared to 60–70%) — they use about half the energy of a radiant coil. They also save energy (and money) by heating the pot a lot faster.

Smart cooking

They're capable of all sorts of clever tricks. For example: they can detect if a saucepan has boiled dry and turn themselves off; they recognise the size of the saucepan and generate the magnetic field to fit; and if you turn the element on but the pan material's incompatible or there's no pan at all, an alarm will sound after a few seconds.

But it comes at a price ...

Four-burner induction cooktops range in price from around $1800–$3000, so they're not cheap at the moment.

You're also likely to have to invest in new cookware. It must have a base made from a magnetic material — for example, cast iron. So you can't use glass, aluminium, copper or many stainless steel pans. Cast iron, enamelled steel and stainless steel pans with an iron or alloy base are suitable. If you're not sure about your stainless steel cookware, check it with a magnet.

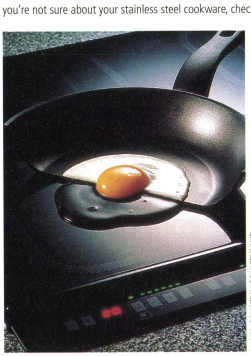


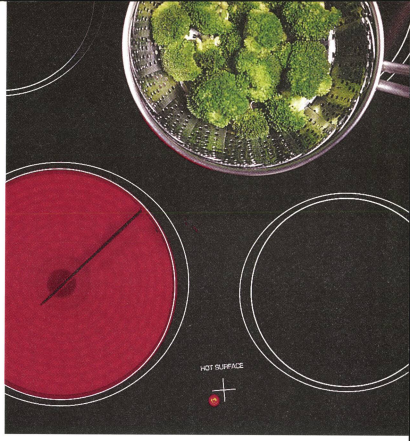
PHOTO COURTESY OF KLEENMAID

Induction cooktops: no pan, no heat — and you wouldn't burn your hand either if you put it on the surface.

TEST REPORT

Ceramic cooktops

They may be good lookers, but are ceramic cooktops good cookers as well?



IN BRIEF

- All 12 ceramic cooktops in the test both cooked well and were easy to use, and you'd probably be happy with any of them.
- Don't spend extra money getting a cooktop with a halogen element — it doesn't cook any better than a regular ceramic radiant element.
- You have to take care of your cooktop by cleaning it carefully and wiping up sugary spills when they happen.
- See *Choosing a cooktop*, page 32, for more on what to look for when you're buying a cooktop and a comparison of ceramic cooktops with other types.

CERAMIC COOKTOPS are the most popular electric cooktop these days: they have modern, stylish looks and they look easy to clean. So much for looking good — what about good cooking?

We put 12 models to the test, checking their speed and controllability as well as ease of use. Overall, they all gave good results, with only minor differences between models.

Most electric cooktops are criticised for responding more slowly than gas to temperature adjustments. Of the tested models, the CHEF and SMEG were marginally better than the rest for this, but again the difference between the models wasn't great.

Is halogen worth the extra money?

The WESTINGHOUSE has two halogen elements and two ceramic radiant rings (see *Choosing a cooktop*, page 32, for more on the different element types). Halogen elements look impressive because they light up more quickly than others. Unfortunately, this doesn't translate to cooking speed or control: we found no significant difference in performance between this cooktop's halogen and radiant coil elements.

Cleaning them

One of the main attractions of ceramic cooktops is that they seem easy to clean: there's just one flat surface with very few nooks and crannies for food and grease to accumulate. The downside is that, because there's also very little or no lip around the edge of the cooktop, there's not much to prevent spills from spreading to the benchtop or floor. And because the surface gets hot during cooking, spills can bake on, making them harder to remove.

Manufacturers recommend you use a cleaner made especially for ceramic cooktops, and most supplied a sample with the cooktop. It'll cost you about $10, although it should last a while, especially if you use a damp cloth with mild detergent for a preliminary clean-up. Avoid harsh, abrasive cleaners and scourers because they'll scratch the surface — most of the cooktops came with a razor scraper to remove stubborn dirt.

Cookware

For best results you need good-quality cookware: saucepans with an uneven base won't have good contact with the surface and won't heat as efficiently. Aluminium and copper-based saucepans can leave a permanent metallic discolouration. You can use cooktop-safe glass cookware, although it may be a little slower-cooking than metal. For more on cookware for ceramic and halogen cooktops, see page 33.

Well-fitting lids help conserve energy and prevent condensation falling onto the stove surface. Manufacturers recommend lifting (not sliding) saucepans off, to avoid scratching the surface — a good reason to avoid heavy pots like those made from cast iron.

How tough are they?

The glass used for the cooktop surface is very tough and durable, but it's not unbreakable — if sharp and hard objects are dropped onto it, the glass can be chipped, cracked or broken. Still, we tried: we tested their ability to withstand an impact equivalent

to dropping a fully laden small saucepan on a hot element and there were no problems. We also heated them up for 15 minutes and then threw cold water on them, but again they stood the test.

The only damage we managed to cause was with cooked-on sugar: manufacturers recommend you wipe up sugary spills immediately, because they can cause pitting of the surface if you leave them — which is what happened when we tried it. Of course, "immediately" means the element and surrounding area are hot, so you have to be careful.

WHAT TO BUY

SIMPSON 64C985U BEST BUY	$729
SMEG SA 604W	$995
CHEF EHCFRSW	$849
KLEENMAID CH16	$999
WESTINGHOUSE PHHY564W	$955
WHIRLPOOL 6AKM613 WH	$829

All the models in the *What to buy* list scored well for both cooking and ease of use and you'd probably be happy with any of them. And if you found any of the other models in the test on special they're worth considering too — they're all reasonably good cooktops.

PROFILES

Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in October 1999. Anything lower is a bargain.

SIMPSON 64C985U

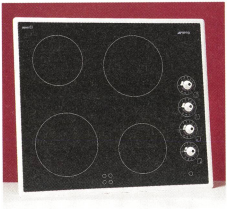
Target price: $729 BEST BUY

Good points

- Best overall.
- Easiest to use.
- Good temperature control and responsiveness — see note 5, page 39.
- No cracks where dirt and grease can accumulate.
- Control diagrams are logical and clear.
- Instructions are easy to understand.

Bad points

- Spills around the control knobs could enter the control workings.
- The power-on lights are combined with the residual-heat lights.



SMEG SA 604W

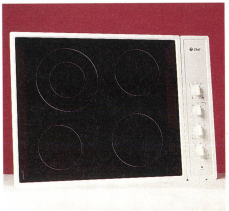
Target price: $995

Good points

- Very good temperature control and responsiveness — see note 5, page 39.
- Power-on indicator and residual-heat lights are bright and easy to see.
- Instructions are easy to read and understand.

Bad points

- The design of the control knobs means your hands are very close to the elements when you're adjusting the knobs.
- Spills around the control knobs could enter the control workings.
- The lip of the cooktop has a fine groove that can trap dirt and grease.



CHEF EHCFRSW

Target price: $849

Good points

- Very good temperature control and responsiveness — see note 5, page 39.
- Best cooking score.
- Control diagrams are logical and clear.
- Instructions are easy to read and understand.
- The control panel comes as a separate piece, so you can install it to the left or right of the cooktop, and it's not as susceptible to spills.
- There's a dual element that lets you use a large or a small saucepan on it without wasting heat, giving more versatility.

Bad points

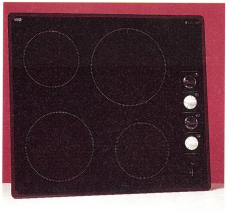
- The lip of the cooktop has a fine groove that can trap dirt and grease.
- The power-on light is combined with the residual-heat light. It's labelled 'Power', which could be misleading — you might think the power is on, whereas in fact it's indicating residual heat. Also, there's just one light for the whole cooktop — it doesn't indicate which particular element is on/still hot.

(profiles continued overleaf)

CERAMIC COOKTOPS

Brand / model (in rank order)	Manufacturer / distributor	Target price ($)*	Origin	Warranty (years)	Dimensions (W x D, mm)	1 Dual element	2 Halogen eleme
SIMPSON 64C985U **(A)**	Email	729	NZ	1	622 x 525		
SMEG SA 604W	Omega / MEA	995	Italy	2	575 x 505		
CHEF EHCFRSW **(A) (B)**	Email	849	Australia	1	595 x 505 **(D)**	✓	
KLEENMAID CH16	Kleenmaid	999	EU	5	590 x 520		
WESTINGHOUSE PHHY564W **(A)**	Email	955	NZ	1	605 x 505 **(E)**	✓	✓
WHIRLPOOL 6AKM613 WH	Whirlpool	829	Italy	2	580 x 510		
ANDI PV140WH	Andi	859	Italy	2	580 x 510		
BLANCO CMRS410	MEA	855	Italy	2	575 x 505		
GE JP136WIVWW	GDA / MEA	845	EU	2	580 x 510		
FISHER & PAYKEL CT5602F	Fisher & Paykel	689	NZ	1 **(C)**	578 X 511	✓	
ST GEORGE CC605B	St George / Kleenmaid	1169	Australia	5	597 x 515	✓	
OMEGA OA26W	Omega	699	Turkey	2	580 x 510		

PROFILES *(continued from previous page)*



KLEENMAID CH16

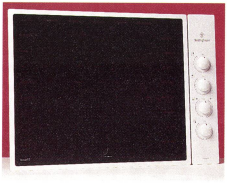
Target price: $999

Good points

- Good temperature control and responsiveness — see note 5, right.
- Controls relating to each particular element are logical and clear.
- No grooves on the cooktop where dirt and grease can accumulate.

Bad points

- Control knobs have a thin crossbar that can make them difficult to grip.
- The control settings may be difficult to understand: the heat settings are arranged anti-clockwise, which could be confusing.
- Spills around the control knobs could enter the control workings.



WESTINGHOUSE PHHY564W

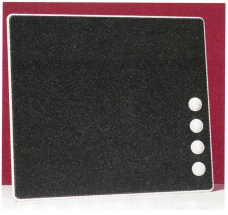
Target price: $955

Good points

- Good temperature control and responsiveness — see note 5, right.
- The control panel comes as a separate piece, so you can install it to the left or right of the cooktop, and it's not as susceptible to spills.
- Control symbols and diagrams are clear and logical.
- There's a dual element that lets you use a large or a small saucepan on it without wasting heat, giving more versatility.

Bad points

- The power-on lights are combined with the residual-heat lights.
- Dots that define the position of the elements are very faint.
- The edge of the cooktop has a fine groove that can trap dirt and grease.



WHIRLPOOL 6AKM613 WH

Target price: $829

Good points

- Good temperature control and responsiveness — see note 5, right.
- Clear and easy to read instructions.
- Control knobs have a comfortable grip and are easy to use.

Bad points

- Poor contrasting colours make it hard to see control settings.
- The cooktop edge has a fine groove that can trap dirt.
- The residual-heat warning lights for the back elements can be difficult to see.

3 Residual-heat indicator	4 Element ratings (kW)	5 Cooking score (%)	6 Ease of use score (%)	7 Overall score (%)	Brand / model (in rank order)
✓(F)	1.2 / 1.2 / 1.8 / 1.8	78	81	80	**SIMPSON** 64C985U **(A)**
✓	1.2 / 1.2 / 1.8 / 1.8	83	75	79	**SMEG** SA 604W
✓ (F) (G)	1.2 / 1.2 / 1.7 / 2.0 (0.6) **(K)**	85	71	78	**CHEF** EHCFRSW **(A) (B)**
✓	1.2 / 1.2 / 1.7 / 2.2	80	76	78	**KLEENMAID** CH16
✓ (F)	1.2 / 1.2 / 1.7 / 2.1 (0.7) **(K)**	75	79	77	**WESTINGHOUSE** PHHY564W **(A)**
✓	1.2 / 1.2 / 1.7 / 1.7	80	71	76	**WHIRLPOOL** 6AKM613 WH
✓	1.2 / 1.2 / 1.8 / 1.8	73	74	73	**ANDI** PV140WH
✓	1.2 / 1.2 / 1.7 / 1.7	78	64	71	**BLANCO** CMRS410
✓(G)	1.2 / 1.2 / 1.8 / 1.8	78	62	70	**GE** JP136WIVWW
✓	1.2 / 1.2 / 1.8 / 2.2 (1.0) **(K)**	65	71	68	**FISHER & PAYKEL** CT5602F
✓(H)	1.2 / 1.2 / 1.8 / 2.2 (0.8) **(K)**	68	69	68	**ST GEORGE** CC605B
✓(J)	1.2 / 1.2 / 1.7 / 1.7	70	61	66	**OMEGA** OA26W

* Prices shown are a good target to aim for, based on nationwide checks in October 1999, except for the Fisher and Paykel, which was priced in January 2000.

(A) Email says this model will undergo changes in March/April 2000, which could affect its performance.

(B) The manufacturer says its new control knobs will turn the heat down lower.

(C) Extra year when Smartcare warranty registration card is returned.

(D) Controls 110 x 505 mm.

(E) Controls 95 x 505 mm.

(F) Combined with 'power on' light.

(G) Only one residual-heat light for all elements.

(H) Combined with 'power-on' lights, but flash to indicate residual heat when power is off.

(J) No power-on light.

(K) Figure in bracket is lower rating of dual element.

1 Dual element

A dual element allows you to use the whole large element or just the smaller element in its centre, giving more versatility. Also see note 4, below.

2 Halogen element

A halogen element may increase the price of the cooktop, but they generally don't cook any better or faster than regular ceramic radiant elements.

3 Residual-heat indicator

It can take up to 30 minutes for a ceramic element to cool down to a safe temperature after cooking. The heat indicator light stays on until it's cool enough to be safe.

A combined residual-heat indicator and power-on light can be confusing because it might make you think the power is still on. See the footnotes for model details. All the cooktops except the OMEGA have a power-on light or lights.

4 Element ratings (kW)

The higher the wattage (rating), the faster an element should heat, but other factors play a role, including the size of pan used. On some models the highest-rated element is dual-ring — you can use just one ring for a small pan or very low heat, or both for high heat with a large pan.

5 Cooking score

Two tests checked how well the cooktop is likely to cook:

- **Rice** — to demonstrate the smallest element's ability to maintain a desired low level of heat for a long period of time.
- **White sauce** — to assess how quickly the element responds to the heat being turned down.

Both contributed equally to the cooking score.

6 Ease of use score

- **Cooking area** — it should be easy to clean, with minimal grooves and crevices that can trap dirt and grease (50% of ease of use score).
- **Controls** — they should be well-spaced, easy to grip and turn, and be clearly marked (40%).
- **Power-on** and **residual-heat indicator** — should be bright, attention-catching and clear as to which particular element is on or hot (10%).

7 Overall score

The overall score was calculated as follows:

- Cooking score (50%).
- Ease of use score (50%).

For people with a disability

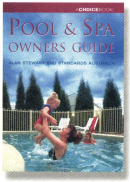
An occupational therapist from the Independent Living Centre assessed the cooktops to determine which models were best for people with certain disabilities.

The best overall was the SIMPSON, while the SMEG was also considered good.

See *Choosing a cooktop*, page 32, for more on what to look for when choosing a cooktop for someone with a disability.

CHOICE BOOKS

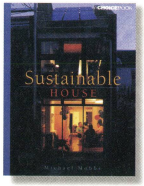
Pool & Spa Owners Guide



If you have a pool or spa, keeping it running efficiently and cleanly shouldn't be torture, nor should it be a mystery — read *The Pool & Spa Owners Guide* and it won't be. In plain English it not only explains what to do to keep your pool or spa running efficiently and healthily, but also gives advice to help you get the right pool or spa for your site.

$25 Code: PSOG

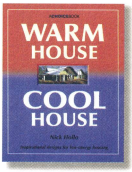
Sustainable House



Learn how a family was able to renovate their inner-city house to make it environmentally friendly and almost completely self-sustaining in water and electricity, while still being a comfortable home. *Sustainable House* includes practical advice for home owners, builders, architects and councils and a list of contacts and suppliers, and is extensively illustrated.

$35 Code: SUSH

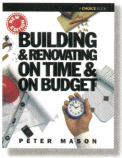
Warm House Cool House



This book provides a comprehensive guide to low-energy house design for all climatic regions in Australia. It includes over 110 inspirational and beautiful Australian examples, plus colour photographs and house plans, and offers practical advice.

$30 Code: WHCH

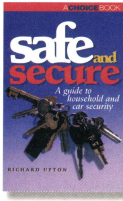
Building & Renovating on Time & on Budget



If you plan to build a new house or renovate an existing one, this book will give you the advice you need. Written in easy-to-understand language, it covers such topics as choosing the right builder, the role of the owner-builder, the building contract, insurance, cost control, and disputes and complaints. It also includes a glossary of building and contractual terms.

$20 Code: BROT

Safe and Secure



Home and personal security are issues that concern everybody, and you don't have to spend lots of money to protect yourself and your belongings. *Safe and Secure* is full of practical advice about ways to protect your family, possessions, car, house and yourself.

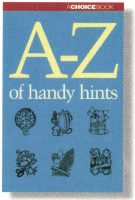
$17 Code: S&S

How to Clean Practically Anything

Sydney Pemberton offers cleaning advice for every part of your home. The book includes comprehensive stain-removal guides, recipes for cleaning products, information about hiring a professional cleaner and an easy-to-follow cleaning calendar.

$17 Code: HCPA

A–Z of Handy Hints



This book is full of fun yet useful hints and tips for your home. Want to know how to whiten cricket gear or ripen fruit? You can find out in this repository of household hints.

$15 Code: AZHH

Safer Pest Control for Homes and Gardens

Anyone who uses pesticides in their home or garden should consult this book about their dangers and the safer options that are available. *Safer Pest Control* provides easy-to-understand information about how common pesticides work, what pests they work on, and when it might be better not to use them.

$16 Code: SPC

A–Z of Chemicals in the Home

This is an alphabetical directory of common household chemicals and household products available in Australia. Prepared by the Toxic Chemical Committee of the Total Environment Centre, it offers plenty of practical advice about household chemicals and safer alternatives (where available).

$15 Code: AZCH

Free and Low-cost Melbourne

Joel Becker and Giacomina Pradolin

Everybody loves a bargain — and what better bargain than something that's free!

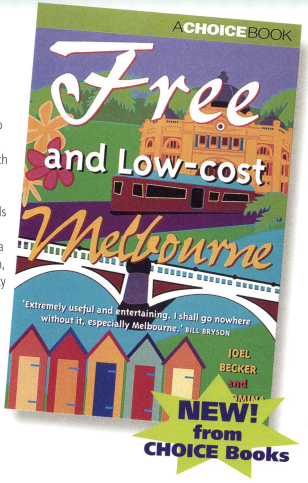
Free and Low-cost Melbourne is a treasure trove of free (or almost free) activities to keep the whole family entertained, informed, exercised, intrigued and inspired for a whole year. Visitors and Melburnians alike, singles, couples, young and old, families with kids to occupy and entertain — everyone will find plenty here to attract them.

This book shows the reader how to find tours of places as diverse as a workshop that makes wall-sized tapestries and an 1860s Victorian pleasure ground; organ recitals or poetry readings; miniature railway rides or bayside bike rides; museums of model ships, stamps or the Chinese in Australia. Find out how you can be in the audience of a TV show, watch rock candy being made, see Ned Kelly's armour and Carbine's skeleton, choose a great indoor adventure playground, walk on a giant chessboard, see the footy for nothing, sample Greek food or see the work of some of Victoria's finest artists and artisans.

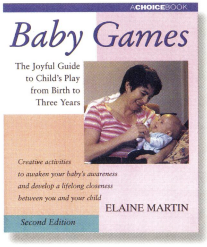
Free and Low-cost Melbourne gives contact numbers, opening hours, addresses, Melway grid references, charges (if any), maps and tips on transport for activities outside the CBD.

A ticket to Melbourne's little-known banquet of free and cheap opportunities.

$15 Code: FLCM



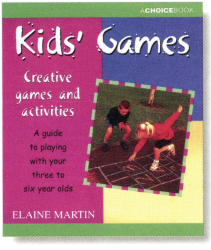
AND look out for an updated edition of *Free and Low-cost Sydney* in next month's Consumer Bookshelf catalogue.


A CHOICE BOOK
Baby Games
The Joyful Guide to Child's Play from Birth to Three Years
Creative activities to awaken your baby's awareness and develop a lifelong closeness between you and your child
ELAINE MARTIN
Second Edition

Baby Games

Playing with your baby creates special bonds of love, communication and caring that will last a lifetime. As your child grows from infant to toddler to preschooler, *Baby Games* offers rhymes, songs, finger plays, activities and games to help create a magical childhood. Whether you're a new parent who has forgotten the words to 'Rock-a-Bye Baby', or an experienced parent who needs some new ideas for the nursery, this is your guide to playing joyfully with your child.

$20 Code: BGCB

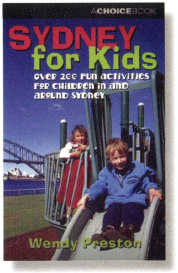


Kids' Games

From the author of *Baby Games*, here is the activity book for children aged three to six years.

Full of fun and variety, it's carefully geared to the child's age, physical development and personal interests. Each chapter contains a selection of games, songs, rhymes and crafts that will both delight and motivate. From recipes to sports, arts and crafts to science projects, *Kids' Games* offers hours of entertainment and education for your child, and for you.

$20 Code: KGCB

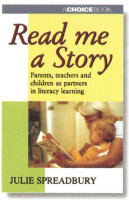


Sydney for Kids

There's another school holiday looming in April and a copy of *Sydney For Kids* could be just what you need. With over 200 fun activities to do in and around Sydney, you're bound to find something to appeal to the children in your life. Includes information on opening hours, charges, tours, toilet facilities and map references.

$15 Code: SFK

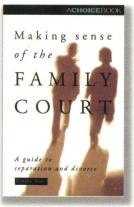
CHOICE BOOKS



Read Me a Story

Teaching a child to read opens up the world, but it isn't always easy for them. *Read Me a Story* suggests ways in which a parent or carer can assist their child's reading development.

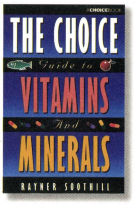
$13 Code: RMAS



Making Sense of the Family Court

Dealing with the Family Court is difficult for many people, but with this book to guide you it can be a lot easier. Written in everyday language, *Making Sense of the Family Court* outlines the court processes, clearly explaining how the Family Court works and what it can do. It also includes advice about where to find further information and help, a glossary of legal terms and a list of Family Court forms.

$16 Code: MSFC



The CHOICE Guide to Vitamins and Minerals

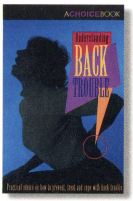
If you want to know how much you need of, and the best way to get, a particular vitamin or mineral, valuable information is offered in *The CHOICE Guide to Vitamins and Minerals*. Each chapter looks at a different vitamin or mineral, its benefits and symptoms of over- and under-consumption, and has an informative table of the best food sources.

$18 Code: CGVM

Understanding Back Trouble

Back problems affect more and more Australians every year. There's a variety of treatments, but what one person swears by, another may find useless. *Understanding Back Trouble* looks at the treatments available and explains what they are and how they work. It also explains how your back works, what can go wrong and how to prevent injuries.

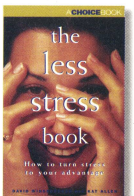
$18 Code: UBT



The Less Stress Book

The Less Stress Book is a down-to-earth, practical guide to coping with, surviving and even flourishing on everyday stress. It includes explanations, case studies, checklists and exercises to help you manage stress.

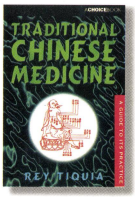
$16 Code: LSB



Traditional Chinese Medicine

Traditional Chinese medicine is becoming more popular and accepted in the west. This book explains the principles behind TCM, particularly herbal and food medicine, tuina (Chinese massage) and acupuncture. It also includes an explanation of what to expect during your TCM consultation and how to make the most of it.

$20 Code: TCM



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CB/0003

Prices are only valid for orders received by 30/6/2000.

Sophisticated hifi video recorders are becoming more popular, but basic mono models can give you as good a picture — and they aren't short on features, either.

Just a cheap video?

SO YOU DON'T WANT TO FORK OUT a grand to watch a movie at home on a new DVD player? And your budget doesn't even stretch to a hifi VCR (video cassette recorder), which is the fastest-growing segment of the VCR market?

If a basic, mono VCR is all you need or can afford, read on. There wasn't much to choose between the 11 models in this test — all priced under $300 — and they were all satisfactory.

What you get

■ All the models tested have standard play (SP) and long play (LP), and so can in effect double the capacity of your video tape (see *What to look for*, page 44).

■ All have two video heads. In normal playback mode, the picture quality of both SP and LP recordings is fine — maybe not as fine as DVD quality, but as good as a more expensive hifi model. However, in other modes (slow, still, fast view forward or fast view backward) you'll get a much lower picture quality from a two-head VCR than from one with four heads. There may be streak lines, loss of colour, or you may be barely able to make out the picture at all. So if picture quality in these modes is important to you, look for a four-head model.

■ The sound quality from a non-stereo VCR is good enough for listening to recorded TV programs and movies that don't rely on special sound effects, but it's definitely lower than you'd get with a hifi model.

Getting greener?

VCRs are commonly 'switched off' with the standby key on the remote. They still draw an electric current and the clock and timer continue to work. The energy used while on standby — and the price you have to pay for it — is relatively low, but it can add up to a substantial amount, assuming there are about four million VCRs throughout the country (for about two thirds of all Australian households). These machines consume about 160 million kWh of energy per year and produce about 160,000 tonnes of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide — simply by being left on standby.

To reduce this impact on the environment, you could switch off your VCR at the power point when you aren't using it for a while and have no recording programmed. But you'd have to reset the clock every time you switched it on again, so it's hardly practical.

Still, it's clear from this test that manufacturers can reduce the standby power consumption of their VCRs: the NEC uses less than a third of the power of the least energy-efficient machine on standby (which is the PANASONIC). See column 10 of the table, page 47, for an environmental score for all the VCRs tested. The higher the score, the lower the power consumption on normal standby. *(continued overleaf)*

IN BRIEF

■ **Even fairly basic VCRs now come with lots of features — and the picture can be as good as with the more expensive hifi models.**

■ **While the sound quality of mono VCRs doesn't compare with that of hifi models, it's still good enough for most videos and TV programs without special effects.**

■ **All VCRs use power while on standby, but some much less than others.**

WHAT TO BUY

All the VCRs scored pretty similarly, so we chose the cheapest and the 'greenest' for the *What to buy* list. In terms of overall performance, they also happen to just lead the pack.

The best and cheapest:
DAEWOO DV-Q229D $239

The 'greenest':
NEC VN-201 $269

Low-power standby

Three of the VCRs tested (the **PANASONIC**, **SANYO** and **SHARP**) have a specific low-power standby mode, in which the VCR uses less power than when on normal standby — the clock on the front panel display is no longer visible. In this mode, the **SHARP** uses only a third and the **SANYO** less than half the energy, though the **PANASONIC**'s power consumption is only slightly reduced.

However, on the two models where the energy savings are greatest, this feature has one serious shortcoming: it won't be activated once you've programmed a recording. Both automatically return to normal standby mode, as they can't record from low-power standby.

PROFILES

Profiles are of the two VCRs in the *What to buy* list. Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in October/November 1999. Anything lower is a bargain.

DAEWOO DV-Q229D

Target price: $239

Good points

- The easiest to use; particularly easy to program a recording with the timer.
- High-speed rewind and fast forward (see far right).
- Commercial skip (see right).
- NTSC playback to a PAL system (see far right).

Bad points

- No automatic head cleaner.

NEC VN-201

Target price: $269

Good points

- Highest environmental score — see note 10, page 47, for details.
- Good front panel controls.
- Commercial skip.
- NTSC playback to a PAL system.
- Three sharpness settings.

Bad points

- No index scan or search.

What about the rest?

All the other VCRs tested scored OK overall and for picture quality.

- The **AKAI, PANASONIC** and **SHARP** have two standby keys, which might be confusing enough to make you miss a programmed recording — see *There's standby, and then there's ... standby?* on page 46 for more on this.
- If you're after a good remote control and you don't mind using two different standby modes, the **AKAI** was judged to have the best remote. The **PANASONIC** has less frequently used function buttons hidden in a covered section, so the rest of the remote looks less 'busy'. On the **JVC**, **SANYO** and **TEAC** the remote control buttons are small and the markings don't stand out well from the background.
- The **AKAI, LG, PANASONIC** and **SHARP** have a good front panel display and the **JVC** good controls.
- The **SANYO** is a bit more difficult to tune manually because there are no onscreen instructions (only on the front panel).
- On the **TEAC** it's particularly easy to program a recording with the timer.

VCRs have a lot of features. We explain a range — for basic users, who just want to watch a video or record a television program, as well as for those who want more.

The basics

- **Simple recording.** All you need to do to record is press the RECORD key to start and the STOP key to end recording.
- **One-touch recording (OTR).** For immediate recording you press the OTR key to start recording, and then set the duration by pressing it repeatedly — once for 30 minutes, for example, twice for one hour and so on. Both preset increments and maximum recording times vary from model to model.

All the models tested have OTR. On the **SHARP** and **SONY** you can use it with a **delayed start**, where both the start time and duration of the recording can be set by repeatedly pressing two designated keys. This only works for recording in one 24-hour period.

- **Timer recording.** If your VCR doesn't have the G-code feature (see right) or you don't know the TV program's G-code number, and you want to set it to record a future program, you have to set the date, start and end time and channel yourself. Most models also have a 'periodic' option that lets you set the timer to record your favourite daily or weekly program. On some models you can preset a month in advance, on others a year.

On most models tested (except for the **PANASONIC** and **SANYO**) you can alter the settings later (after they're stored in the VCR's memory). This is useful if you want to adjust the settings when you know a programmed broadcast is running late, for example.

- **Manual and auto tuning.** All the models tested have both auto and manual channel tuning. With auto tuning the VCR finds the channels and allocates numbers to them. With manual tuning you can find the best reception in your area, and allocate whatever number you want (or, in some instances, names) to a particular channel. The maximum number of available channels ranges from 48 to 99.

You won't get good still pictures with two-head videos like those in this test.

But here's more ...

■ **G-code recording.** Television programs have a G-code number that represents their channel number, date, start time and duration, and is published in TV guides. This is an easy and convenient function: you just press the G-code button on the remote and type in the G-code number. See the table on page 46 for which models accept G-codes.

The first time you use your new VCR for G-code recording, you have to relate the channel settings on the machine to the actual broadcast channels. For example, that TEN (in Sydney) was allocated to 10, or that 5 relates to 28 (SBS). On some models (the **SONY** in this test) you have to set all the channels initially when you first set up the VCR; on others (the **LG** and **SANYO**) you have to enter the channel number the first time you key in a G-code that uses that channel. On the **JVC** you can do it either way.

After you've keyed in the G-code, you'll see displayed onscreen the details of the program set to be recorded. On some models (the **JVC**, **SANYO** and **SONY**) you can amend the set recording duration (end time) to take late-running programs into account; some (the **LG** in this test) even let you amend other settings such as the date or start time as well.

■ **Channel erase (skip)** lets you bypass or remove unassigned, unwanted or less frequently used channels, so you don't have to pass through all of them if you use the channel up and down keys. All the models tested have this feature.

■ **Channel relocate** lets you easily swap preassigned channels. Most models tested have this feature; the **PANASONIC** and **SHARP** don't.

■ **Counter reset to zero.** This is useful if you want to monitor the length of tape used, or note down specific points in the footage. All the models tested have it.

■ **Eject key on remote control.** Too lazy to get up and eject the tape after the movie's finished? On some VCRs (see the table on page 47) you can do so with the remote. You still have to get up eventually and put the tape back into its cover, but at least it won't stay wrapped around the heads.

■ **Commercial skip.** No, this isn't what you may hope it is. There's still no VCR that can detect and completely zap commercials, but this feature makes it easier for you to fast forward through them when you're watching a recorded program. You press a designated key once and the VCR skips a short section (around 30 to 120 seconds, depending on the model). The following models tested have this feature: **DAEWOO**, **LG**, **NEC**, **PHILIPS**, **SHARP** and **TEAC**.

... and more

■ **SP** and **LP**, and **automatic SP to LP.** Short, or standard, play (SP) is the normal speed of the video recorder. Long play (LP) effectively gives you more tape by recording at half the normal speed — fitting more on the tape. All the VCRs tested have it. Some models can automatically switch to LP if they detect that there isn't enough tape left for your recording (see the table, page 46, for which models). A slight drawback with LP is that it reduces the quality of the picture a little.

Above left: Front AV (audio/video) inputs make it very easy to connect another VCR or video camera. Above right: Onscreen instructions make manual tuning of the VCR easier. Only the Sanyo in this test didn't have them for this function.

On the Panasonic remote (below left) the buttons you don't use very often are under a cover, leaving the rest looking uncluttered and easy to use. On the JVC (below right) the buttons are small and the markings don't stand out well from the background.

■ **Slow playback.** Couldn't quite see which horse won the cup? With slow play you can run the recording at a speed slower than normal, but sound is muted in this mode. The following models tested have this feature: **DAEWOO**, **JVC**, **PANASONIC**, **PHILIPS**, **SHARP**, **SONY** and **TEAC**.

■ **High-speed rewind and fast forward**. If you're 'time-poor' and every second counts, this feature will save you a little time when you're waiting for a tape to finish rewinding or fast forwarding. Of the models in this test, the **PANASONIC** and **SHARP** have the fastest rewind times — just over one minute for a three-hour tape. The **DAEWOO** and **TEAC** rewind the tape in less than two minutes, while the others take two to a little over three minutes.

■ **NTSC play/record** is a picture format used in the US — Australia uses PAL. With all the VCRs tested you can play videos from the US, but only the **PANASONIC** and **SONY** also let you record NTSC pictures via AV inputs.

■ **Child lock** will lock the front panel controls. You can only reactivate them with the remote control.

... and perhaps more than enough

■ The **LG** model in this test has '**SRS 3D sound**'. The manufacturer says this is "based on the human hearing system", "works with any audio signal whether it's mono, stereo or surround sound" and makes "the entire room feel like one giant sweet spot". If only they could improve the quality of TV programs while they were about it.

■ The **PANASONIC** model tested has a **play off timer**, which stops playing the tape after a set period of time. We're still wondering what use it would be — stop the kids from watching for more than a set time? Stop playing eventually while you're asleep on the couch?

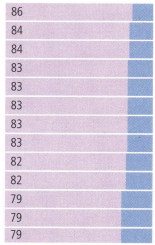
	Brand / model (in rank order)	Manufacturer / distributor	Origin	Target price ($) *	Warranty (years)	Dimensions (H x W x D; mm) **	1 G-code	2 Automatic SP to LP	3 One-touch recording w delayed sta
	DAEWOO DV-Q229D	Daewoo	Korea	239	3	100 x 360 x 290		✓	
	NEC VN-201	NEC	Indonesia	269	1	95 x 360 x 275			
	AKAI VS-J200EA	Akai	Korea	259	1 **(A)**	95 x 360 x 275		✓	
equal	**LG** AF293RW	LG	Korea	279	1 **(B)**	95 x 360 x 285	✓		
	SHARP VC-A230X	Sharp	Malaysia	279	1	95 x 360 x 265		✓	✓
	TEAC MV-3090	Teac	Korea	269	1 **(C)**	100 x 360 x 290		✓	
equal	**JVC** HR-J255EA	Hagemeyer	Malaysia	279	1	95 x 400 x 290	✓	✓	
equal	**SONY** SLV-EZ10AZ	Sony	Malaysia	299	1	95 x 355 x 310	✓		✓
equal	**PHILIPS** VR299/75	Philips	Malaysia	269	1	95 x 360 x 290		✓	
	SANYO VHR-VX400	Sanyo	Indonesia	279	1	100 x 360 x 310	✓	✓	
	PANASONIC NV-SD230A	Panasonic	Malaysia	299	1 **(D)**	90 x 430 x 310			

How reliable have subscribers found them?

We asked a group of subscribers about the reliability of their VCRs. The graphs on the right show the results for the brands for which we got sufficient answers (the number in brackets tells you how many readers reported on the brand). Note that the results of the survey also cover brands not included in this test, and that we don't have reliability data for all the brands on the market.

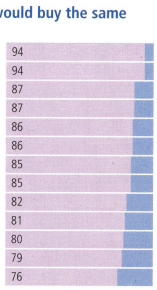
About 17% of respondents said their VCR had needed repair in the previous 12 months, making VCRs one of the less reliable home appliances. The most common problem was dirty heads (12%).

Percentage not needing repair



Differences of more than 5% are meaningful.

Percentage who would buy the same brand again



There's standby, and then there's ... standby?

Three of the VCRs tested have two different standby buttons to switch the VCR on and off, which we think is confusing. Here's how it works.

When you've finished programming the timer for a recording, you have to put the VCR on standby while it's waiting to record — on most models this is done with the power standby key. However, on the **AKAI, PANASONIC** and **SHARP** you have to use a separate timer standby key. If you use the power standby key, the machine won't record.

So, say you've set the timer to record a program later that night when you're out. If someone else watches a video in the meantime and switches off the machine using the power standby key, it won't record the program. To keep the timer memory activated, the VCR has to be switched on and off with the timer standby key. We've lowered the score for ease of programming for these machines because it would be easy to miss a recording.

We could only think of one advantage of having these two standby buttons — to bypass a periodic recording. Say you've set the timer to record your favourite show while you're out every Monday afternoon. If you're at home one Monday and want to watch the show rather than record it, you don't have to erase your programming. You can simply put the machine on power standby to prevent it recording on that occasion, then use the timer standby key to activate it again, so it records the next episode the following Monday. But we think the potential confusion of having two standby buttons far outweighs this one advantage.

The **JVC** also has a timer standby key, but it doesn't have the same problem as the models noted above.

4 Front AV inputs	5 Eject tape with remote	6 Child lock	7 Low-power standby mode	8 Ease of use score (%)	9 Picture quality score (%)	10 Environmental score (%)	11 Overall score (%)	Brand / model (in rank order)	
	✓	✓		72	66	50	67	**DAEWOO** DV-Q229D	
	✓	✓		67	61	80	66	**NEC** VN-Z01	
		✓		69	61	60	65	**AKAI** VS-J200EA	
✓ (E)	✓	✓		70	61	60	65	**LG** AF293RW	equal
		✓	✓	64	65	70	65	**SHARP** VC-A230X	
	✓	✓		68	65	50	65	**TEAC** MV-3090	
✓ (F)				65	64	60	64	**JVC** HR-J255EA	equal
	✓			71	64	30	64	**SONY** SLV-EZ10AZ	
✓ (E)	✓	✓		63	64	50	62	**PHILIPS** VR299/75	equal
		✓	✓	65	61	50	62	**SANYO** VHR-VX400	
	✓		✓	65	64	30	61	**PANASONIC** NV-SD230A	

* Prices shown are a good target to aim for when shopping around, based on nationwide checks in October/November 1999.

** Dimensions shown are rounded up to the next 5 mm; all protruding parts except the cord are included.

(A) Additional two years for $40.

(B) Additional two years on drum and heads parts, if you register.

(C) Extra warranty for $26 a year, up to a maximum of nine additional years.

(D) Additional two years for $30.

(E) Front AV inputs are independent of the rear inputs, so you can plug in an extra item, such as a camcorder or second VCR.

(F) Has no rear AV inputs.

All the VCRs tested have two video heads (see *What you get*, page 43, for details). All passed basic electrical safety tests and complied with tuning standards and Y2K requirements.

1 to 6 Features

See *What to look for*, page 44, for an explanation of these (and other) features.

7 Low-power standby mode

See *Low-power standby*, page 44, for a description of this feature and its shortcomings.

8 Ease of use score

VCRs are quite complex machines. We assessed the following areas for ease of use:

- Front panel controls (10%).
- Remote control (30%).
- Front panel display (10%).
- Onscreen display (15%).
- Manual tuning (5%).
- Programming — with timer and G-code (if applicable) (30%).

9 Picture quality score

We assessed the VCRs on:

- Short-play (SP) recordings from various sources (60%).
- SP recording played back in slow, still, fast view forward (cue) and fast view backwards (review) modes (20%).
- Long-play (LP) recording played back in normal, slow, still, fast view forward (cue) and fast view backwards (review) modes (20%).

10 Environmental score

We measured the energy consumption in normal standby mode for all the models tested. The higher the score, the lower the energy consumption in normal standby mode.

11 Overall score

The scores were weighted as follows:

- Ease of use score: 50%.
- Picture quality score: 40%.
- Environmental score: 10%.

Ease of use is weighted highest because so many people find VCRs a pain to program and set up, and because the models performed similarly for picture quality.

We checked that the sound quality was OK, but results aren't included in the scores. If it's important to you, get a hifi VCR.

For people with a disability

How easy are the remote and front panel controls to operate and the display to read if you have problems with vision or using your hands? We assessed the video recorders for helpful features and potential difficulties, based on guidelines from the Independent Living Centre.

- The **remote control** should be easy to grip, well balanced and comfortable to hold, and should operate with minimum thumb pressure.
  - It should allow you to scroll directly between tuned channels without having to enter the channel numbers.
  - Buttons should be large and well spaced. Those with related functions should be grouped — colour coding can help distinguish different functions.
  - Markings should be clear and contrast well with the background colour.
- The **onscreen display** should indicate clearly what's happening when you use the remote control.

The **AKAI**'s remote control was considered best for people with a disability, but its two standby modes could be confusing (see *There's standby and then there's ... standby?*, left.

If you prefer to use the front panel controls, the NEC (above) had the best: widely spaced buttons that stand out well and are clearly marked. Knob-style controls (such as on the LG and Sharp) may be more difficult for some people to operate than buttons.

RECALLS & BANS

If you find a recall or ban not on our list, please let us know. Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after the recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct. For up-to-the-minute information, check our recalls list by clicking the recalls banner at www.choice.com.au.

THE PRODUCT: Hot Tuna has recalled the following **beanbags,** sold from July 1, 1999:

- Style 89041, assorted cotton prints.
- Style 89039, fake fur material.

The beanbags have a Hot Tuna label but aren't marked with the style number. They're the only Hot Tuna beanbags that have been available in this timeframe.

The problem: The beanbags don't have the required child-resistant slide fastener or carry labels warning of the danger posed by the beans inside if inhaled or swallowed by children.

What to do: Return the beanbag to the place of purchase. Hot Tuna will either adjust the product to conform to standards or issue a refund. For further information, contact Hot Tuna on (02) 6552 5155.

THE PRODUCT: JNH Australia has recalled the following three automotive accessory products, sold in major retail outlets and independent stores:

- **Safefit Sesame Street seatbelt adjuster.**
- **Safety 1st seatbelt adjuster.**
- **Safety 1st seat buckle cover.**

The problem: The products don't meet recent changes in mandatory standards.

What to do: Return the products to the point of sale or to JNH at PO Box 407, East Bentleigh 3165, for a full refund. Any queries may be directed to the JNH Quality Assurance Department on (03) 9579 0533.

THE PRODUCT: Praise Foods has recalled all 250 mL glass bottles of **Praise Original French Dressing** with a best-before date of 25 Oct 2000.

The problem: A small number of bottles in this batch are slightly more prone to breaking than normal.

What to do: Don't eat the dressing. Return the product to the point of purchase for an immediate refund. For further information contact Praise Foods on 1800 638 112.

THE PRODUCT: Simplot Australia has recalled the following varieties of **Leggos Stir Through Pasta Sauce 350 g** with a best-before date of 30 Nov 2001 or earlier:

- Roast Capsicum and Mushroom.
- Spicy Antipasto.
- Sundried Tomato.
- Chargrilled Vegetable.
- Tomato, Olive and Chilli.

The best-before date is printed on the side of the lid.

The problem: Glass has been reported in some jars.

What to do: Don't eat the pasta sauces. Return the products to the point of purchase for a full refund. For further details contact Simplot on 1800 890 089.

THE PRODUCT: Toyota has recalled all **Lexus IS200** vehicles with **automatic transmission** produced from January 6, 1999, through to November 1, 1999, with the following vehicle identification:

Model: GXE10.

VDS: B5182.

Frame number: From 0005745 to 0037098.

This information can be found on the compliance plate on the bulkhead under the bonnet.

The problem: The engine control computer may malfunction, causing insufficient engine vacuum build-up within the brake booster for a duration of one-and-a-half minutes after engine start-up. This can result in longer stopping distances or an increase in force required to apply the brake pedal.

What to do: All owners should have been contacted by mail and telephone, but any owner not yet approached should contact Toyota on (03) 9647 4594. All vehicles under recall will have the engine control computer replaced. A two-minute warm-up period should be allowed at cold engine start-up until the necessary replacement has been made.

THE PRODUCT: Nilfisk-Advance has recalled **Nilfisk Backuum (H13 Hepa) vacuum cleaners** with model number 17900003, sold in Australia between August 1998 and November 1999.

The problem: Due to the design of the vacuum cleaner's moulded waistbelt switch, there is a risk that if the operator sweats heavily the waistbelt may become damp and conductive and give the operator an electric shock.

What to do: Don't use the vacuum cleaner in a very warm environment. Contact your nearest Nilfisk-Advance authorised service agent or Nilfisk-Advance directly on 1800 011 013 to arrange for a modification free of charge.

THE PRODUCT: Click has recalled the following **Click Multi Coloured Rope Light** sets sold at major hardware retailers:

- 6 Metre Multi Coloured Rope Light, part number CLKRL6MTRMUL.
- 10 Metre Multi Coloured Rope Light with Controller, part number CLKRL10MTRMULC.
- 6 Metre Multi Coloured Rope Light with Controller, part number CLKRL6MTRMULC.

The part numbers can be found on a label attached to the lead.

The problem: Wiring in some of these rope lights has protruded through the outer PVC tubing, leading to a risk of electric shock.

What to do: Immediately disconnect the light from the power supply and return it to the place of purchase for a full refund. For further information contact Click on weekdays between 8 am and 5 pm EST on 1300 302 205.

THE PRODUCT: DaimlerChrysler Australia/Pacific has recalled all **Mercedes-Benz M Class** vehicles (type W163), models ML320 and ML430 between chassis end numbers 2A 000001 and 2A 134523, manufactured prior to August 1999. The chassis number can be found on a black cutout on the front windscreen under the left wiper arm and begins with: WDC 163154 or WDC 163172.

The problem: One of the front seat-belts may not fully engage.

What to do: All owners should have been contacted by mail. If you haven't yet been approached, contact DaimlerChrysler customer service on (03) 9566 9245. All vehicles should be inspected at an authorised Mercedes-Benz dealer and the belt buckle replaced if necessary.

THE PRODUCT: Simplot Australia has recalled **Frozen Neptune Prawns,** 1 kg packs of black tiger prawns cooked and peeled with the tail on. The pack is marked "Product of Thailand" with a best-before date of 31/03/2001 and was sold through a small number of wholesale outlets in NSW and WA between November 29, 1999, and December 12, 1999.

The problem: The product may contain harmful bacteria.

What to do: Return the prawns to the point of purchase for a full refund. Anyone who eats the prawns and shows signs of illness should consult a doctor immediately. For further details contact Simplot on 1800 061 279.

THE PRODUCT: Neumann Steel has recalled its pool safety fence and solar-water-heating system, **Solarfence.** The recall only applies to Solarfences sold and installed between September 1992 and January 1996.

The problem: The adhesive used to bond the plastic segments of the Solarfence together may degrade the plastic and, over time, the fence may deteriorate to a less than 'pool-safe' standard.

What to do: If you had a Solarfence installed between the above dates and haven't already received a letter, contact Neumann Steel on (07) 5589 9111 to arrange installation of a replacement Solarfence free of charge, or a refund of the purchase price.

THE PRODUCT: Woolworths has recalled all **Home Brand Corn & Chicken Flavour Noodles** 85 g (APN 9300633611125) sold in Woolworths supermarkets, Food for Less and Flemings Food Stores in NSW and the ACT with the use-by code "Best Before Oct 2000". The noodles were delivered to stores between December 1 and 20, 1999.

The problem: A small number of fine aluminium wire fragments have been detected in some of the flavour sachets in the packets of noodles.

What to do: Don't eat the noodles. If you've eaten them and have any concerns, see your doctor. Return the packet to the nearest Woolworths, Food For Less or Flemings Food Store for a full refund. For further details contact Woolworths customer service on 1800 703 009.

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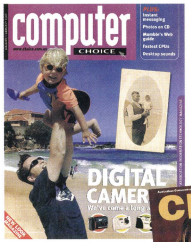

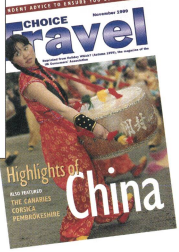

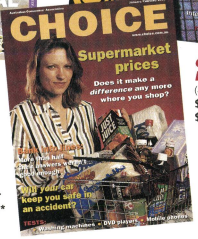

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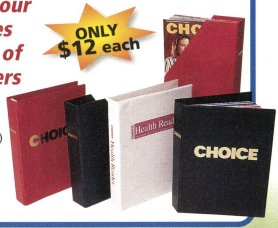

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ABOUT THE AUSTRALIAN CONSUMERS' ASSOCIATION

The Australian Consumers' Association is a non-profit, non-party-political organisation, established in 1959 to provide consumers with information and advice on goods, services, health and personal finances, and to help maintain and enhance the quality of life for consumers. It is a Council member of Consumers International.

We are completely independent. We buy all the products we test at random in the marketplace; we never accept products to be tested as gifts or loans from manufacturers or retailers. We are not beholden to any commercial, government or union interests, and we don't accept advertising, paid or unpaid. Our income is derived from the sale of CHOICE and our other publications and products.

We test and rate products and services. Our ratings are usually based on quality without regard to price, and are derived from lab tests, expert judgments and reader surveys. If a product is high in quality and relatively low in price, we deem it a **Best Buy**. A rating applies only to the brand and model tested, not to other models sold under the same brand name, unless so noted. We can't conduct special tests or provide information about tested products beyond what appears in CHOICE. Financial information in CHOICE is of a general nature, and is not intended to be advice on individual investments.

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Manager: Alan Sharp. **Contact:** Jeanette Dwyer on (02) 9577 3399.

Twelve-month INDEX

April 1999 — March 2000

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* indicates an update of a previous report, additions or corrections to reports, small follow-up items or letters.
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the HARD word

It's a cat-eat-cat world

"Kitten with chicken" — does Whiskas know something about cat-cannibalism that we don't?

The amazing beans

If you're concerned about the genetic modification of foods, keep an eye out for a couple of revolutionary new bean products: Edgell's new baked beans are, believe it or not, now complete with ring-pull. And at last, a vegetarian serving of those notoriously meaty baked beans! Thank you, Weight Watchers.

Personal Memo
From the Desk of
Eric Savage

RE: The Greatest Kept Secret of All Time for Money, Power, Romantic-Love!

Dear Friend,

This may be the luckiest day of your life! You are one of only a very few selected people to receive this personal memo. It could be the most important event that will ever happen to you. By the time you finish reading this personal memo, you'll know exactly what to do to make $5,000, $10,000, even $100,000 cash...IN THE NEXT FEW WEEKS!

Zero to hero?

The Hard Word has been inundated with copies of a Personal Memo from the desk of Eric Savage, promoting *God-Man: Our Final Evolution* — a book that could change every man's life. Become a millionaire, date beautiful women, lose weight, gain power! And all for a mere $155. If Eric knows how, why is he telling you?

How about a little help?

The hard word would like to thank all the readers who've responded with examples of outrageous ads, promotions and products. Thanks to V Collins, Z Roxon, N Nelson, B Eager, B Emmott, G King, W Hollmann, L Daniel, A Danilov and the Gray family for their contributions to this month's *The hard word.* Please keep sending them in.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to *The hard word,* CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, or email your suggestions to thehardword@choice.com.au.

A request from our art team: If you send us clippings, labels or packaging, please keep them as clean and neat as possible (and don't mark them with highlighters or pens or cut the corners off, etc) so we can reproduce them on this page. Thank you.

An honest trade?

Not surprising Weston Realty's fees are GST-free — the tax doesn't come into force till July.

Private Sale Negotiations
Market Valuations
NB OUR FEES ARE GST FREE!!!
Phone Proprietor Michael Weston
WESTON REALTY

You must be yolking!

As nine-year-old Zoë Roxon wrote to *The Hard Word*, "I wonder what chooks say when they express themselves freely?"

These eggs come from hens that are:

- Free from hunger and thirst.
- Free from pain and injury.
- Free from fear and distress.
- Free from discomfort.
- Free to express themselves.

More snack in your pack!

You'll be thrilled to learn that Colvan's 65 g net packet of Burger Snacks contains 30% more product than the regular 50 g packet. No kidding.

MARCH 2000

for the publisher, Australian Consumers' Association, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.